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**REQUIEM**  
**AND OTHER POEMS**

*By the Same Author*

\*

SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

LATER POEMS

Translated by J. B. Leishman

DUINO ELEGIES

Translated by J. B. Leishman  
and Stephen Spender

\*

*The Hogarth Press*

RAINER MARIA RILKE  
**REQUIEM**

*AND OTHER POEMS*

Translated from the German  
With an Introduction and Notes by

J. B. LEISHMAN



*Second Edition*  
*Revised and Enlarged*

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## Preface

THE present volume of selections from what might be called the pre-Elegiac period of Rilke's poetry contains, in a thoroughly revised form, all the translations from *Frühe Gedichte*, *Das Buch der Bilder*, (1902 and 1906), *Neue Gedichte* (1907 and 1908), and *Requiem* (1909), which were originally published in *Poems* (1934), and *Requiem and other Poems* (1935). Four poems from *Neue Gedichte* have been added, but the selections from *Die Sonette an Orpheus* and *Späte Gedichte* which were included in *Requiem and other Poems* have been omitted, the translator having since then published complete versions of those two books.

The original Introduction to *Requiem and other Poems* has, with the minimum of necessary correction, been retained. In certain respects the account there given of Rilke's two visits to Russia and of the *Stundenbuch* would now require some modification in the light of the since-published *Tuscan Journal*, which he kept during a stay in Florence in the Spring of 1898. Here already, before he had visited Russia, occurs the conception of a God in process of becoming, a God in some sort created by men, a conception which, as Dr. Helmut Wocke has insisted (*Rilke und Italien*, 1940, 28), must be regarded as the expression of an essentially artistic rather than of an essentially religious attitude—as an attempt (characteristic of many contemporary poets and writers—consider Yeats's *Autobiographies* and earlier essays, and Pater, with whom Rilke was familiar in translation) to make a kind of religion out of art. What, in fact, Russia gave Rilke would seem to have been, not so much a new conception of life, as the symbols, the external equivalents, for something he had already conceived in Italy.

J. B. L.

## NOTE

The references to Rilke's works are to the *Gesammelte Werke in Sechs Bänden*, abbreviatedly referred to in the Introduction as *G.W.*



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# INTRODUCTION

Κατὰ μὲν τὴν οὐσίαν καὶ τὸν λόγον τὸν τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι λέγοντα  
μεσότης ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετὴ, κατὰ δὲ τὸ ἄριστον καὶ τὸ εὖ ἀκρότης.

## I

**R**AINER MARIA RILKE was born at Prague in 1875. The careful researches of his son-in-law have shown that his father's family was descended from a line of German peasants, of whom the earliest we can trace died about 1625; but there was a tradition that the family was related to a more ancient and noble branch, and it was this tradition that the poet preferred to accept. His father, Josef Rilke, had been intended, like his two elder brothers, for the career of an officer in the Austrian army, but, after serving with distinction in the campaign against Italy in 1859, he had been compelled to ask for a long leave of absence on grounds of ill-health, after which his prospects of promotion had seemed so remote that he resigned. He then became a railway official, but, although he achieved some success and distinction in this career, he remained until the end of his days a disappointed man, rather contemptuous of the bourgeois life he was forced to lead, and for many years found his one consolation in the hope that his son René would be able to obtain the commission he himself had been compelled to forgo. The birth of René had been preceded by that of a daughter who died in infancy; this had been a great grief and disappointment to the mother, who seems to have tried to console herself for the loss by pretending, so long as she possibly could, that René was a girl. Until he was five years old he wore dresses and long curls and played with dolls; and even when these things had to go his only meetings with boys of his own age were on his birthdays. Even for an ordinary and normal child such an upbringing would have been likely to exact retribution, and René was not ordinary: he revealed a precocious talent for writing and drawing which his adoring parents unwisely encouraged, thereby accentuating still further the difference between him and other children. Rilke, in his letters and elsewhere, has spoken of the agonies he suffered during the five years—September, 1886, to June, 1891—at the Lower and Higher Military Schools of St. Pölten and

Mährisch-Weisskirchen. It is true that from the age of ten the boys in these institutions were subjected to a strict military discipline, and that Rilke has embodied what seemed to him part, at any rate, of the spirit and tendency of that discipline in *Die Turnstunde* (The Gym. Lesson), where a poor nervous boy dies of heart failure after having been compelled to climb a pole by a brutal drill-sergeant; but it is probable that with his temperament and with his unwise upbringing he would have been miserable in any public school. For his school-fellows saw in him something that boys nearly always hate—one with interests different from theirs, one who could live in a world of his own. He was finally removed from Mährisch-Weisskirchen on the ground of continuous ill-health, and until May, 1892, he studied at the Commercial Academy in Linz. There everything came easily to him, and he was praised by his teachers. Strangely enough, whatever he may have suffered at the Military Schools, his enthusiasm for the military career seems to have been unimpaired, for we find him writing to his mother: "I have only put off the Emperor's uniform in order, within a short time, to put it on again—for ever; and I am convinced that I shall wear it honourably." An unpropitious love-affair seems to have brought his stay at Linz to an abrupt close, but almost immediately his Uncle Jaroslav, a barrister, proposed that René should succeed him in his practice, and offered to pay all the expenses of his education. The offer was accepted, and from 1892 to 1895 Rilke studied hard and was exceedingly happy. He wrote incessantly, and in 1894 published his first volume of poems. 'One is tempted to remark,' says his son-in-law, Carl Sieber, 'that Rilke during these years was hopelessly sentimental. He spends All Souls' Eve in the churchyard and writes, as he himself says, "deeply-felt poems."' While studying at the University of Prague, 1895-6, he published at his own expense *Wegwarten*, 'Songs, presented to the people,' of which he gave copies to hospitals and municipal libraries, and *Larenopfer* (published in 1896, when he was a student at Munich) was also written in Prague. A selection from these and other early volumes—*Traumgekrönt* (1897), *Advent* (1898), *Mir zur Feier* (1899)—occupy the first volume of his collected works.

By 1908 he had decided to collect and re-publish the best

## INTRODUCTION

in these early volumes, revising it a little where necessary, in order, as he said, that the past might thus be gradually built up into permanence. If we would understand him fully we should act upon this hint; his was a nature exceptionally at one with itself, every part of his life or work helps us to understand every other, and the past often provides us with a key to the future.

*Larenopfer*, as its title implies, is in the main a tribute to his native Bohemia and Prague. Nearly all the poems are 'descriptive,' but, paradoxical as it may seem, observation, 'seeing' (that watchword of the later Rilke) is a comparatively unimportant element. The great matter is not what the poet saw, but what he felt about it. True, the Hradschin, the old streets with their fountains and statues, the old houses with their memories, the peasants with their dances and songs, appear on every page; but then they are every-day, intimate things among which his whole childhood has been passed. They are bound up with his feelings and find their way into his poetry almost unconsciously. He does not have to force himself to observe them; they are simply there, as they have always been, and he sees them through whatever happens to be the mood of the moment. They are only united to him through his moods, live only in his joy and sorrow: they have no independent life.

In *Traumgekrönt* (Dream-crowned) and *Advent* the subject of most of the poems is more frankly the poet's self—or—shall we say?—a number of different selves, some more real and permanent than the others. Many of them, both in metre and mood, recall the earlier poems of Heine. They are often curiously sentimental, and could not be literally translated unto English without appearing absurd. Nevertheless, in *Advent* there are two notable poems where he seems to be groping after something larger and sterner and more satisfying than this gentle romanticism; although perhaps what is expressed is still rather an attitude than an experience:

Das ist mein Streit:  
Sehnsuchtgeweiht  
durch alle Tage schweifen.  
Dann, stark und breit,  
mit tausend Wurzelstreifen  
tief in das Leben greifen—

RAINER MARIA RILKE

und durch das Leid  
weit aus dem Leben reifen,  
weit aus der Zeit!\*

This is my strife: to rove through all days longing-consecrated. Then, strong and broad, with thousand root-strips to grasp deep into life—and through suffering to ripen far out of life, far out of time!

Nennt ihr das Seele, was so zage zirpt  
in euch? Was, wie der Klang der Narranschellen,  
um Beifall bettelt und um Würde wirbt  
und endlich arm ein armes Sterben stirbt  
im Weihrauchabend gotischer Kapellen,—  
nennt ihr das Seele?

Schau ich die blaue Nacht, vom Mai verschneit,  
in der die Welten weite Wege reisen,  
mir ist: ich trage ein Stück Ewigkeit  
in meiner Brust. Das rüttelt und das schreit  
und will hinauf und will mit ihnen kreisen . . .  
Und das ist Seele.†

Do you call that soul, the thing that chirps in you so timorously? That, like the sound of a fool's bells, begs for applause and courts respect and finally, poor itself, dies a poor death in the incense-evening of gothic chapels,—do you call that soul?

When I watch the blue night, snowed with May, in which the worlds are travelling distant ways, I seem to carry a piece of eternity in my breast. That shakes and cries and wants to be up and circling round with them . . . And that is soul.

Only an intimation, perhaps; but of the various selves or half-selves which in these early poems we find beating their wings and clamouring for recognition this is the one destined to conquer and to become the 'real Rilke'—the Rilke who was to be perpetually losing himself in order to find himself, to

recognize renunciation  
as price of seeing and in death his progress.

\*G.W., I, 167.      †G.W., I, 176.

## INTRODUCTION

But the many signs of spiritual and artistic progress that may be detected in these volumes ought certainly to be connected with the first of that small series of particular events or discoveries which Rilke himself came to regard as decisive in his development—his acquaintance with the great Danish novelist and story-teller Jens Peter Jacobsen, whose works, since 1877, had been appearing in various German translations. When, in 1908, he was asked by a Viennese bookseller to reply to the question, What books will provide a young man with what one might call his minimum intellectual subsistence? he declared that in his own development the works of Jacobsen, whose *Niels Lyhne* had been recommended to him in 1897 by Jakob Wassermann, had been decisive. 'For it is to them in the first place that I owe my readiness for uneclectic observation and my resolution to admire, and they have continued to strengthen in me, since I came to love them, my inner conviction that even for what is most delicate and inapprehensible within us nature has sensuous equivalents that must be discoverable.' And in the *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* (Letters to a young Poet), which he wrote between 1903 and 1908, almost his first advice is to read Jacobsen: Jacobsen and Rodin, he declares, are the only two artists from whom he has learnt and experienced something 'about the nature of creation, about its depth and its eternity.'

What, then, did he learn from Jacobsen? The key to the problem is provided by two phrases in his reply to the Viennese bookseller—that Jacobsen's books opened for him the way from himself to nature, and gave him, or strengthened for him, the conviction that it was possible to discover in nature sensuous equivalents for what was most delicate and inapprehensible within him. Jacobsen's greatest novel, *Niels Lyhne*, is the story of a man who was intended to be a poet, but who was never able to make a unity of his poetry and of his life; who was never able to endure that solitude which is the price that must be paid for poetry, who kept turning for support to people, to 'ideals,' that continually deceived him. To the young dreamer who in the early poems may be seen trying to keep vulgar reality at arm's length the book was at the same time a rebuke and a revelation. Some of the most memorable passages are those about Niels's mother, who since her girlhood had lived in a world of dreams and fictions with which reality, to her

perpetual disappointment, refused to conform. During an illness, when she expected to die, she had constantly dreamt of all the beauty in the world which she had never experienced, so her son promised that if she recovered he would take her with him on a long tour.

The first day she was still restless and nervous because of that last remnant of fear, and it was only after she had happily overcome this that she was able to feel and understand that she was now really on the way to all that glory for which she had longed so heavily. An almost feverish joy overcame her, and a strained expectancy marked all her thoughts and words, which only revolved around what the days, one after the other, would bring.

Then indeed it all came, everything came, but it did not fill and possess her with either the power or the intensity she had expected. She had thought of it as being quite different, but then, too, she had thought of herself as being quite different. In dreams and in poems it had always been situated as it were on the other side of the lake, the mist of distance had veiled the restless swarm of particulars in surmise, and in broad outlines had gathered the forms of things into a unity that was complete, and the silence of distance had spread its festal mood thereover, and it had been so easy to apprehend it in beauty; but now that she stood right in the midst of it, and every tiny feature stepped up to her and carried the many voices of reality, and beauty was as divided as the light of prisms, now she was unable to unite it, unable to transport it to the other side of the lake, and with deep dejection she had to confess that she felt poor in the midst of all this wealth she was unable to command.

In the following passage, describing the effect on Niels of his love for Frau Boye, not only the pervading spirit but almost every sentence, every phrase, simply shouts 'Rilke!' to anyone who is at all familiar with his mature work. Let the reader turn back to it when, a few pages further on, he comes to the famous description of poetry from *Malte Laurids Brigge*.



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A poet was to be made out of Niels Lyhne, and in the external conditions of his life there had also been sufficient to lead his own inclinations in this direction, sufficient to draw the attention of his faculties to such a task; but till now he had had hardly any other foundation for becoming a poet than his dreams, and nothing is more uniform, more monotonous than fantasy; for in the apparently infinite and eternally changing country of dreams there are in reality certain short, given roads which everyone travels and no one gets beyond. People can be very different, but their dreams are not; for there they get themselves presented, more or less quickly, more or less completely, but nevertheless constantly and conjointly, with the three or four things they desire; there is no one who really sees himself with empty hands in his dream; therefore no one discovers himself in his dream, never becomes conscious of his peculiarity; for his dream knows nothing of the satisfaction one finds in winning the treasure, how one lets it go when it is lost, how one is sated when one enjoys, what path one strikes into when one does without.

That was why Niels Lyhne too had on the whole written his poetry out of an æsthetic personality that found spring abundant, the sea vast, love erotic and death melancholy. He himself had not got any further by means of this poetry, he only made the poems. But now it began to be different. Now, when he was courting a woman's love and wanting her to love him, him, Niels Lyhne of Lönborghof, who was twenty-three, bent forward a little in his walk, had nice hands and small ears and was by nature a little timid—he wanted her to love him and not the idealized Nicholas of his dreams, who had a proud walk, assured manners and was a little older; he now took a lively interest in this Niels with whom he had formerly associated as with some less presentable friend. He had been too busy adorning himself with what he lacked to have time to notice what he possessed; but now with the passion of a discoverer he began to gather himself together out of the memories and impressions of his childhood, out of the vivid moments of his life, and with happy astonishment he saw how it fitted together, piece by piece, and built itself up into a quite differently

intimate personality from the one he had been pursuing in his dreams. And also far more genuine and strong and energetic. It was no longer a mere dead block of an ideal; the wonderful, unfathomable nuances of life itself glimmered therein in changing infinity, behind thousand-membered unity. My God, he had powers which, just as they were, could be used, he was Aladdin; there was nothing which, if he had wished it down out of the clouds, would not have fallen into his turban.

And as for those 'spiritual equivalents in nature' of which Rilke speaks, they surprise and delight us continually in all Jacobsen's writings, and sometimes suggest that the soul of one of our own 'metaphysical' poets has been re-incarnated in a modern scientific naturalist.

It was Jacobsen, then, who helped Rilke to find the way from himself to nature, or, if you like, helped him to escape from himself, to surrender himself, in order to find himself. In his next volume, *Mir zur Feier* (In my own Honour), re-published with alterations, as *Frühe Gedichte* (Early Poems), there is still some romanticism, but it is a far less conventional romanticism; there is still dreaming, but a far more substantial dreaming, where reality is no longer distorted, but often achieves a heightened significance. Above all, we can see the beginning of the great endeavour to give life to things. The chief sign of immaturity (judging the poems, that is, by the standard of Rilke's later achievement, for they would have been sufficient in themselves to make the reputation of a lesser poet) is a certain lack of substance and bite and of evidence that the author is grappling with something and that his finest achievements have been won at a great cost. Our final impression, perhaps, is still of something eclectic, something a bit rarefied and tenuous and Ariel-like. Rilke himself said later of this volume that it represented the furthest point reached by a definite stage in his development,\* and the introductory poem suggests that for the time being he was satisfied with this stage. We feel—looking back—that the circle has been too easily completed:

\**Briefe an seinen Verleger*, 56.

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Das ist die Sehnsucht: wohnen im Gewoge  
und keine Heimat haben in der Zeit.  
Und das sind Wünsche: leise Dialoge  
täglicher Stunden mit der Ewigkeit.

Und das ist Leben. Bis aus einem Gestern  
die einsamste von allen Stunden steigt,  
die, anders lächelnd als die andern Schwestern,  
dem Ewigen entgegenschweigt.\*

This is longing: to dwell in fluctuation and have no home in time. And these are wishes: gentle dialogues of daily hours with eternity.

And this is life. Until from some yesterday rises the loneliest of all hours and, smiling differently from the other sisters, returns the silence of the eternal.

There is one very notable poem which in *Mir zur Feier* was entitled *Boboli*, and which was altered and perfected and left anonymous in the *Frühe Gedichte*. It is the forerunner of many poems in later volumes, where some stone figure in a garden or on a cathedral tower, the smiling Angel of the South holding its stone tables under sun and moon, the concentrated stillness of an image of Buddha, the Anemone's sensitiveness, the long and finally rewarded renunciation of the Saint, symbolize the nature and function of the poet.

Schau, wie die Zypressen schwärzer werden  
in den Wiesengründen, und auf wen  
in den unbetrebbaren Alleen  
die Gestalten mit den Steingebärden  
weiterwarten, die uns übersehn.

Solchen stillen Bildern will ich gleichen  
und gelassen aus den Rosen reichen,  
welche wiederkommen und vergehn,  
immerzu wie einer von den Teichen  
dunkle Spiegel immergrüner Eichen  
in mir halten und die grossen Zeichen  
ungezählter Nächte näher sehn.†

\*G.W., I, 255. †G.W., I, 290.

Look, how the cypresses are growing darker in the meadow-grounds and in the untreadable walks the forms with their stony gestures go on waiting for someone and overlook us.

I too will resemble such quiet figures and reach out composedly from the roses that return and pass away; hold in myself for ever, like one of the ponds, dark mirrors of oaks that are ever green, and see from closer to the great signs of uncounted nights.

## II

Meanwhile his uncle Jaroslav had died, and while studying at Munich Rilke definitely abandoned law in favour of literature. Our knowledge of him first becomes really definite and precise in 1899, when the first volume of his *Letters and Journals* begins. There we find him staying with his friend Lou Andreas-Salomé and her husband at Schmargendorf, near Berlin, and full of anticipation of his first journey to Russia. These two visits to Russia, which he and his friend made in 1899 and 1900, were perhaps the most important events in his life. Something of what they meant to him may be best conveyed by a few extracts from his letters and journals.

One can hardly say how new this country is, how full of the future. As though its palaces and churches had still to come into existence—sometime!\*

I have been three weeks in Russia, have heard the Easter bells in Moscow and by the gleaming of the birch woods and the roaring of the broad Neva I perceive the first approach of spring. The mere daily fact of living among this people full of reverence and piety is strange, and I find a deep delight in this new experience.†

It seems that Russian people live fragments of infinitely long and mighty careers, and even if they only linger therein for a moment, there hang nevertheless over these minutes the dimensions of gigantic intentions and unhasting developments . . . And it is just this that comes to us from all their lives with such a thrill of eternity and of the future.‡

\**Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, 12. †*Op. cit.*, 14-15.  
‡*Op. cit.*, 30.

## INTRODUCTION

During his second visit he again met Tolstoy, and said of his talk:

The conversation deals with many things. But the words do not pass by *in front* of them, keeping to externals, they press through in darkness behind the things. And the deep value of every word is not its colour in the light, but the feeling that it comes from the darknesses and the secrecies out of which we all live. And whenever, in the sound of his talk, the non-mutual became apparent, there opened somewhere a prospect on to bright backgrounds of deep unity.\*

And in the same letter:

As we returned on foot to Koslowka we enjoyed and understood the country of Tula, in which wealth and poverty exist side by side, not as opposites, but as different, very sisterly words for one and the same life that fulfils itself, exultant and careless, in a hundred forms.†

To be for days and nights, many days and many nights, on the Volga, this peacefully rolling sea: a broad, broad stream, tall, tall forest on one bank, on the other side deep heath-land, in which even great cities stand like huts and tents.—One re-learns all dimensions. One experiences: land is large, water is something large, and above all the sky is large. What I have seen hitherto was only an image of land and river and world. But here is everything itself.—I feel as though I had been present at the Creation; few words for all being, things in the proportions of God the Father.‡

He had been unconsciously prepared for it all: as he wrote during his first visit:

At bottom, one seeks in everything new (country or person or thing) only an expression, that helps some personal confession to greater power and maturity. In fact all things are there in order that they may in some

\**Op. cit.*, 41.    †*Op. cit.*, 42.    ‡*Op. cit.*, 265-6.

sort become images for us. And they do not suffer thereby, for while they express us ever more clearly, our soul broods in the same measure over them. And I feel during these days that *Russian* things will give me the names for those most terrible pieties of my being, which, ever since childhood, have been longing to enter my art.\*

Some years later he tried to sum up in the following passages what Russia had meant to him:

When I came for the first time . . . to Russia, after a short rest in the inn and in spite of my tiredness I went straight into the town. I found this: in the dusk there loomed up the gigantic contours of a church, at its sides, in the mist, two silver chapels on whose steps pilgrims were waiting for the opening of the doors. This for me unfamiliar sight moved the very depths of my being. For the first time in my life I had an inexpressible feeling, something like a feeling of home—I felt with great strength the fact of belonging to something, my God, to something in this world. I resolved to remain in Russia.†

This, no doubt, is the experience to which he refers in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, written at the end of March, 1904, while he was in Rome:

For me there was one Easter; that was away back in that long, unfamiliar, uncommon, excited night, when all the people pressed forward and Ivan Velikij struck me in the darkness, stroke on stroke. That was my Easter, and I think it is sufficient for a whole life; with strange largeness the message was given to me in that Moscow night, given me in my blood and in my heart. I know it now: *Christos voskres!*‡

Russia was reality and at the same time the deep, daily insight, that reality is something distant, coming infinitely slowly to those who have patience. Russia, the country where people are lonely people, each with a world in himself, each full of darkness like a mountain, each deep

\**Op. cit.*, 17. †Quoted in *Stimmen der Freunde: ein Gedächtnisbuch*, p. 38.

‡*Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 144.

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in his humility, without fear of humiliating himself, and therefore pious. People full of distance, uncertainty and hope: people becoming something. And over all a never-fixed, eternally changing and growing, God.\*

Patience, Humility, God—words and ideas that occur continually in his writings, and were inseparably connected with his memories of Russia. In none of his hitherto published letters has Rilke expressed himself very fully or explicitly on the subject of the Russian revolution, although in 1921 he wrote of Russia as ‘the only country that has taken the whole infinite sorrow upon itself and transformed it within itself’; but when in 1907 he met Gorki he felt that the ‘democrat’ in him was a barrier between them:

The obstacle is the greater in this case, inasmuch as the revolutionary seems to me a contradiction both of the Russian and of the artist: both have in their innermost natures so very much reason to be opposed to revolutions, because for both nothing is so important as patience, and nothing so natural for the one as for the other.†

And in 1903, speaking of a perception he had of the history of endless generations of things unfolding itself beneath human history, he wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé:

Perhaps some time, Lou, Russian man will become a part of this history, who, just as Rodin does as a creator, descends from and is related to things as a becomer and endurer, blood-related. That capacity to wait which is characteristic of Russian man (which the German’s self-important preoccupation with the unimportant calls laziness) would thus receive a new and certain elucidation: perhaps the Russian is so made as to let human history go by him, in order, later, to fall into the harmony of things with his singing heart. He has only to endure, to hold out, and, like the violinist to whom no signal has yet been given, to sit in the orchestra carefully holding his instrument, so that nothing may happen to it.‡

\**Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, 419. †*Briefe aus den Jahren 1906-1907*, 251-2. ‡*Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 125-6.

Here it is perhaps worth while to observe that statements such as this, which are very frequent in Rilke and which practically-minded persons might be inclined to dismiss as the vapourings of an æsthete, are intended to mean exactly what they say, and that behind and beneath them is a system of values that inter-penetrates all his writings and may well be called the 'essential' Rilke. It is idle to complain that he always looks at life as an artist; he always persistently refused to make any distinction or separation between art and life. For him, to see things as an artist, to see them, if you will, *æsthetically*, was to see them *really*, and in their true relations. For him, death was as important as life, past as present, eternity as time, childhood as maturity, animals and things as men and women, the dark background of consciousness, with all its secret and inexplicable terrors and grandeurs, as our most daylight thoughts and activities. He refused to accept any conventional hierarchy of being, any conventional distinction between important and unimportant, great and small. The words 'God' and 'angel' appear again and again in his writings; he continued to use them although he early forsook conventional religion. They represent the sudden irruption of transcendent and super-human values and standards into a conventional world. It is the world as it might appear to *them* that Rilke tries to see and to express. But this is to anticipate; for although after his return from Russia Rilke may be said already, in a sense, to have formed his characteristic attitude to life, there is an immense distance between the *Stunden-Buch* and the *Duineser Elegien*: his view of life has then become more comprehensive, more ruthless, less eclectic, less sentimental; and God and the angels have become more terrible and more remote.

After his second visit to Russia he moved into a small house of his own at Schmargendorf and studied Russian history, art and literature with passionate energy, trying to order and assimilate his impressions and experiences, trying to transform, as he put it, what as yet was but half-recollection and half-intimation into an encompassing element, 'calm and secure, like something that existed from all eternity, although my eyes have grown more and more equal to it.'\* The first two parts of the *Stunden-Buch* or *Book of Hours*—'The Book of Monastic

\* *Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, 53.



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Life' and 'The Book of Pilgrimage'—although not published until 1905, were the fruit of all this. They represent the meditations of a Russian monk 'on God, on Nature and on human life.' The central idea is that of the brotherhood of all men and things and of the mutual dependence of God on man and man on God. Russia was always 'Holy Russia' for Rilke, and everything he saw or felt there was a revelation of God. God was continually revealing himself, continually being created in 'that land where the people are lonely people.'

Denn nur dem Einsamen wird offenbart,  
und vielen Einsamen der gleichen Art  
wird mehr gegeben als dem schmalen Einen.  
Denn jedem wird ein anderer Gott erscheinen,  
bis sie erkennen, nah am Weinen,  
dass durch ihr meilenweites Meinen,  
durch ihr Vernehmen und Verneinen  
verschieden nur in hundert Seinen  
ein Gott wie eine Welle geht.

Das ist das endichste Gebet,  
das dann die Sehenden sich sagen:  
die Wurzel Gott hat Frucht getragen,  
geht hin, die Glocken zu zerschlagen;  
wir kommen zu den stillern Tagen,  
in denen reif die Stunde steht.  
Die Wurzel Gott hat Frucht getragen.  
Seid ernst und seht.\*

For it will only be revealed to the lonely and to many lonely of the same sort more will be given than to the narrow one. For to each a different God will appear, until, near to crying, they recognize that through their miles-apart supposing, through their understanding and denying, there goes like a wave, different only in his hundred existings, one God.

This is the ultimate prayer which the seers will then repeat to themselves: the root God has borne fruit, go and smash the bells; we are approaching the stiller days in which

\*G.W., II, 197.

the hour stands ripe. The root God has borne fruit. Be  
grave and see.

And the *civitas dei* that he imagines is a kind of idealized  
Russia:

Alles wird wieder gross sein und gewaltig,  
die Lande einfach und die Wasser faltig,  
die Bäume riesig und sehr klein die Mauern;  
und in den Tälern, stark und vielgestaltig,  
ein Volk von Hirten und von Ackerbauern.

Und keine Kirchen, welche Gott umklammern  
wie einen Flüchtling und ihn dann bejammern  
wie ein gefangenes und wundes Tier,—  
die Häuser gastlich allen Einlassklopfern  
und ein Gefühl von unbegrenztem Opfern  
in allem Handeln und in dir und mir.

Kein Jenseits warten und kein Schaun nach drüben,  
nur Sehnsucht, auch den Tod nicht zu entweihn  
und dienend sich am Irdischen zu üben,  
um seinen Händen nicht mehr neu zu sein.\*

All will be great and powerful again, the lands simple  
and the waters folded, the trees gigantic and the walls  
very small; and in the valleys, strong and multiform, a  
people of shepherds and tillers of the soil.

And no churches, that embrace God like a fugitive and  
then commiserate him like a captured and wounded  
animal—the houses hospitable to all knockers for admis-  
sion and a feeling of unbounded sacrifice in all business  
and in you and me.

No waiting for a beyond and no gazing up above,  
only longing not to deconsecrate even death, but to  
practise oneself submissively on the earthly, so as to be no  
longer new to his hands.

The passing reference to Christianity in this poem is charac-  
teristic. Rilke had much sympathy with the lonely and suffering

\*G.W., II, 254.

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Christ, but he had no sympathy whatever with the conceptions of mediation and atonement. The mediator, he thought, merely got in between people and God, prevented them from finding God in the world, encouraged them to neglect the world and its glory for the sake of some imaginary heaven. In a few passages in the *Stunden-Buch* he plays with the notion of God the son created by man the father, but, in general, when he gives human attributes to God, we are reminded rather of the Old Testament than of the New. The picture that unconsciously forms itself in our minds, even if the words do not immediately suggest it, is that of an old man with a beard—an old peasant, perhaps, a Russian peasant. God the Father, the God of children and old, simple people.

Die Dichter haben dich verstreut  
(es ging ein Sturm durch alles Stammeln),  
ich aber will dich wieder sammeln  
in dem Gefäss, das dich erfreut.

Ich wanderte in vielem Winde;  
da triebst du tausendmal darin.  
Ich bringe alles, was ich finde:  
als Becher brauchte dich der Blinde,  
sehr tief verbarg dich das Gesinde,  
der Bettler aber hielt dich hin;  
und manchmal war bei einem Kinde  
ein grosses Stück von deinem Sinn.

Du siehst, dass ich ein Sucher bin.

Einer, der hinter seinen Händen  
verborgen geht und wie ein Hirt;  
(mögst du den Blick, der ihn beirrt,  
den Blick der Fremden von ihm wenden).  
Einer, der träumt, dich zu vollenden  
und: dass er sich vollenden wird.\*

The poets have scattered you (a storm went through all the stammering), but I will gather you again in the vessel that delights you.

\*G.W., II, 214.

I wandered in many a wind; you drove a thousand times therein. I bring all that I find: the blind man used you as a bowl, the servants hid you very deep, but the beggar held you out; and sometimes there was a large piece of your meaning with a child.

You see, I am a secker.

One who walks hidden behind his hands and like a herd; (may you turn from him the glance that confuses him, the glance of strangers). One who dreams of completing you and—that he will complete himself.

Alle, welche dich suchen, versuchen dich.  
Und die, so dich finden, binden dich  
an Bild und Gebärde.

Ich aber will dich begreifen,  
wie dich die Erde begreift;  
mit meinem Reifen  
reift  
dein Reich.\*

All who attempt you, tempt you. And those who find you bind you to image and gesture.

But I will comprehend you as the earth comprehends you: your kingdom ripens with my ripening.

Du bist so gross, dass ich schon nicht mehr bin,  
wenn ich mich nur in deine Nähe stelle.  
Du bist so dunkel; meine kleine Helle  
an deinem Saum hat keinen Sinn.  
Dein Wille geht wie eine Welle,  
und jeder Tag ertrinkt darin.

Ich finde dich in allen diesen Dingen,  
denen ich gut und wie ein Bruder bin;  
als Samen sonnst du dich in den geringen,  
und in den grossen gibst du gross dich hin.

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Das ist das wundersame Spiel der Kräfte,  
dass sie so dienend durch die Dinge gehn:  
in Wurzeln wachsend, schwindend in die Schäfte  
und in den Wipfeln wie ein Auferstehn.\*

You are so great, that I quite cease to be if I merely place myself near you. You are so dark, my little brightness on your border has no meaning. Your will moves like a wave, and every day is drowned therein.

I find you in all these things to which I am kind and like a brother; you sun yourself like seed in the small ones, and surrender yourself greatly in the great.

Such is the wondrous play of forces, passing so serviceably through things: growing in roots, vanishing into the trunks, and in the tree-tops like a resurrection.

And so Rilke expresses in a hundred forms this dominating conviction or intuition of the omnipresence of God and the divinity of the world. The experience behind these poems is intense, but, in comparison with that behind his later poems, still rather vague and limited and subjective. The reader is perhaps reminded of the child-like happiness of a much lesser poet, Traherne, in whose world also pain and suffering and evil do not appear, or, rather, are not really seen or felt. The form, if one may make that distinction, is often more important than the content. The chief characteristic of the poems is what a musician would call 'colour'; Rilke is intoxicated by the music of words and by the play of images, by the infinite patterns of sound and sense that may be woven from them. His favourite device of alliteration is perhaps overdone, although he often uses it to produce new and striking effects, and, in particular, to unite words and meanings never united before: a kind of wit which resembles that of our own 'metaphysical' poets, although they did not exploit this particular device of style. It enables him to present the most surprising combinations with a peculiar kind of nonchalance, as something obvious and a matter of course.

He has now travelled some distance on the road from himself to nature, but the light in which all objects are bathed is as yet

\**G.W.*, II, 192, 189.

too strong for his eyes to concentrate upon 'minute particulars.' The circle is still too easily completed, the unity achieved is still too undifferentiated, behind the triumphant affirmation there is too little weight of conquered negation. In October 1907, in Paris, he wrote to his wife, who had been describing the glory of Autumn in Westerwede, where, in 1901, he had composed the second part of the *Stunden-Buch*:

If I came up to you I should certainly see the pomp of moor and heath, the hoveringly bright green of the meadows, and the birches newly and differently; it's true that this transformation, as I once experienced and shared it completely, called forth a part of the *Stunden-Buch*; but at that time nature to me was still a general occasion, an evocation, an instrument in whose strings my hands rediscovered themselves; I did not yet sit before her; I let myself be rapt away by the soul that went out from me: she came over me with her wideness, with her vast exaggerated existence, as the prophesying came over Saul; precisely so. I strode along and saw, not nature, but the visions she inspired in me. How little I should have been able to learn at that time in front of Cézanne, in front of Van Gogh . . . I am on the way to becoming a workman.\*

In 1901 he married the young sculptress Clara Westhoff, a pupil of Rodin's, whom he had met in the artists' colony at Worpswede. They lived at Westerwede, near Bremen, in a kind of peasant's cottage on a moor. It was a time of great experience, but also of great poverty and anxiety. Early in 1902 we find him asking a friend to try and help him to a position in a publishing-house, art gallery, theatre, or the like, since he is unable to support himself and his family by writing. A little later he says that his wife is willing to give art lessons, and that he is terribly worried by the fact that affairs at home will make it necessary to discontinue a small allowance on which he has been living.

For me marriage, which from the ordinary standpoint was a great imprudence, was a necessity. My world, which

\**Briefe aus den Jahren 1906-1907*, 377.

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has so little connection with mortal life, was in bachelor-quarters abandoned to every wind, unprotected, and required for its development a quiet house of my own beneath the wide skies of solitude.\*

His father had been kind but uncomprehending—had offered him a position in a bank, supposing that he could do his 'writing' in the evenings! He declares that he cannot go back: 'I would rather starve with those who belong to me than take this step, which is like a death without the grandeur of death.'† Then, some months later, he appeals to the generosity of some friends he had known in Munich to make it possible for him to spend one year in Paris. He feels that what he has never yet enjoyed, a single year free from anxiety, is most necessary for his development. He and his wife have both resolved that their work is the most important thing, and if necessary they are ready to part from time to time in order to continue it.‡ (Here it is perhaps worth adding that Rilke's view of marriage, like his other views, was far from conventional. He frequently condemns the popular ideals of self-surrender and self-abandonment, which to him mean a shallow community achieved by the obliteration of distinctions and differences, and insists that the duty and privilege of each partner is to be the guardian of the other's solitude, and that love is an opportunity to become, for the sake of another, a world for oneself.¶)

The journey to Paris was made possible, and in June, 1902, Rilke wrote his first letter to Rodin, saying that he had been commissioned to write a monograph on him and that he was coming to Paris in order to meet him.

Before speaking of his association with Rodin a few words must be added about Rilke's development up to this time. Not only had he acquired in Russia that deep mystical sense of the brotherhood and unity of all men and things; he had also been steadily developing his powers of *Anschauen*, of observation. In 1901 he sent his young brother-in-law a copy of the poem *Die Pfauenfeder*, 'The Peacock's Feather,' saying that he wrote it many years ago at a fair in Munich, where people bought peacocks' feathers and amused themselves by tickling each other.

\**Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, 141. †*Op. cit.*, 143.

‡*Op. cit.*, 107-8; ¶*Briefe an einen jungen Dichter*, 38.

But do you know, dear Helmuth, what was the most important thing to me?—the fact that I perceived once again that most people take hold of things in order to do something stupid with them (as, for example, to tickle each other with peacock's feathers), instead of looking at each thing properly and asking it about the beauty it possesses. Thus it comes about that most people simply don't know how beautiful the world is and how much splendour is revealed in the smallest things, in a common flower, in a stone, in the bark of a tree or the leaf of a birch. Grown-up people, who have occupations and cares and who worry themselves about mere trifles, gradually lose the eye for these riches, which children, if they are observant and good, quickly notice and love with all their hearts.\*

A year earlier he records in his journal how a Corot in a Hamburg gallery suggested to him that he was beginning to *see* pictures for the first time. He must go to Paris and visit Rodin and make up for a great deal he has missed in his solitude. 'The Russian journey with its daily losses remains for me such an infinitely terrifying proof of my immature eyes.'† And the entry closes with the poem *Fortschritt*, 'Progress,' later published in the *Buch der Bilder*:

Und wieder rauscht mein tiefes Leben lauter,  
als ob es jetzt in breitem Ufern ginge.  
Immer verwandter werden mir die Dinge  
und alle Bilder immer angeschauter.  
Dem Namenlosen fühl ich mich vertrauter:  
mit meinen Sinnen, wie mit Vögeln, reiche  
ich in die windigen Himmel aus der Eiche,  
und in den abgebrochnen Tag der Teiche  
sinkt, wie auf Fischen stehend, mein Gefühl.‡

And louder once again rushes my deep life, as though flowing now between broader banks. Things become more and more akin to me and all pictures more closely observed.

\**Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, 122-3. †*Op. cit.*, 341-2.

‡*G.W.*, II, 57.



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I feel more intimate with the Nameless: with my senses, as with birds, I reach from the oak into the windy skies, and my feeling, as though standing on fishes, sinks into the fragmentary day of ponds.

And now came the two most important events in his life after the Russian journeys—Paris and Rodin. His first stay there was from August, 1902, to March, 1903, and his letters are full of two things: boundless admiration for the personality and genius of Rodin, and sensitive recoil from the miseries and horrors, the cruelty and indifference of the city. In his second letter to his wife, describing some of his first impressions, he says:

And then there is only Rodin. And in between, again and again, the Louvre. Everything will relate itself to him and group itself around him. Paris, too, perhaps, which is indeed a great strange city, very, very, strange to me. The numerous hospitals, which are everywhere here, trouble me. I understand why they continually appear in Verlaine, in Baudelaire and Mallarmé. One sees invalids, walking or driving to them, in every street. One sees them at the windows of the Hotel-Dieu in their curious uniforms, the sad pale uniforms of the Order of Sickness. One feels all of a sudden that in this wide city there are hosts of invalids, armies of dying, nations of dead.\*

In July, looking back upon these first months from Worpswede, he wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé:

I should like to tell you, dear Lou, that Paris has been for me an experience similar to the Military School; just as then a great terrifying astonishment seized me, so now I was seized with horror at the prospect of all that, by some unspeakable confusion, is called life. Then, when I was a boy among boys, I was alone among them; and how alone I was now among these people, continually denied, as it were, by everything that met me; the carriages drove right through me, and people in a hurry

*\*Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906, 24.*

did not turn aside to avoid me but ran over me, full of contempt, as over a bad place in the road in which stale water has collected. And often before going to sleep I read the thirtieth chapter of the book of Job, and it was all true of me, word for word. And in the night I got up and looked for my favourite volume of Baudelaire, the *petits poèmes en prose*, and read aloud that most beautiful poem entitled: *A une heure du Matin*. Do you know it? It begins: Enfin! Seul! on n'entend plus que le roulement de quelques fiacres attardés et éreintés. Pendant quelques heures nous posséderons le silence, sinon le repos. Enfin! la tyrannie de la face humaine a disparu, et je ne souffrirai plus que par moi-même . . . And it ends magnificently: stands up, stands and goes out like a prayer. A prayer of Baudelaire's; a real, simple prayer, made with the hands, clumsy and beautiful as the prayer of a Russian.—He had a long way to get there, Baudelaire, and he went kneeling and crawling . . . I arrived [in Paris] in August of last year. It was the time when the trees in the town are faded without autumn, when the glowing streets, distended by warmth, won't end, and one walks through smells as through many sad rooms. I walked past the long hospitals, whose gates stood wide open with a gesture of impatient and eager charity. As I was passing the Hôtel-Dieu for the first time an open cab was just driving in, in which hung a man, swaying at every motion, crooked as a broken marionette, and with a severe abscess on his long, grey, hanging neck. And what people I have met since then, almost every day; ruins of caryatids, on whom the whole of grief still rested, the whole building of a grief, under which they lived slowly like tortoises. And they were passers-by among passers-by, left alone and undisturbed in their fate. At the most they were received as impression and regarded with calm objective curiosity as a new kind of animal, in whom necessity has formed peculiar organs, hunger and death organs. And they carried the comfortless, miscoloured mimicry of the overgrown city and held out every day like tough beetles under the foot that trod on them, continued, as though they still had to wait for something, twitched like pieces of a great hacked fish, already

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decaying but still alive. They lived, lived on nothing, on dust, on soot, and on the dirt on their surfaces, on what falls from dogs' teeth, on any kind of senselessly broken thing that may still be bought by someone for some inexplicable purpose. O what a world is this! Pieces, pieces of men, parts of animals, remains of things that have been, and all still in movement, driving confusedly as in some uncanny wind, carried and carrying, falling and overtaking itself in its fall.\*

In March, unable to bear it any longer, he had escaped for a month to Viareggio and there had written the third and last part of the *Stunden-Buch*, 'The Book of Poverty and of Death,' the record of the first overwhelming impression made upon him by Paris and by the misery and poverty of Paris, and of his effort to grapple with it and, as he would say, to transmute it. The introductory poem superbly expresses the humility and courage with which he invariably met and responded to every new experience :

Vielleicht, dass ich durch schwere Berge gehe  
in harten Adern, wie ein Erz allein;  
und bin so tief, dass ich kein Ende sehe  
und keine Ferne: alles wurde Nähe,  
und alle Nähe wurde Stein.

Ich bin ja noch kein Wissender im Wehe,—  
so macht mich dieses grosse Dunkel klein;  
bist du es aber: mach dich schwer, brich ein:  
dass deine ganze Hand an mir geschehe  
und ich an dir mit meinem ganzen Schrein.†

It may be I am going through heavy mountains, in hard veins, like an ore alone; and am so deep that I see no end and no distance: all became nearness, and all nearness became stone.

As yet I am no expert in pain,—hence this great darkness makes me small; if you are, though, make yourself heavy, break in: so that your whole hand may fall upon me and I on you with my whole cry.

\**Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 97-99. †*G.W.*, II, 269.

At times he has longed to escape to the loneliness and spaciousness of Russia, where God is always near:

Schick mich in deine leeren Länder,  
durch die die weiten Winde gehn,  
wo grosse Klöster wie Gewänder  
um ungelebte Leben stehn.  
Dort will ich mich zu Pilgern halten,  
von ihren Stimmen und Gestalten  
durch keinen Trug mehr abgetrennt,  
und hinter einem blinden Alten  
des Weges gehn, den keiner kennt.\*

Send me to your empty lands through which the wide winds go, where great convents stand like vestments about un-lived lives. There I will join pilgrims, no longer parted by any deception from their voices and forms, and travel behind some blind elder the road that no one knows.

For great cities are far from Nature and God:

Da wachsen Kinder auf an Fensterstufen,  
die immer in demselben Schatten sind,  
und wissen nicht, dass draussen Blumen rufen  
zu einem Tag voll Weite, Glück und Wind,—  
und müssen Kind sein und sind traurig Kind.†

There children grow up at window-ledges that are always in the same shadow, and do not know that outside flowers are calling to a day full of space, joy and wind,—and have to be children and are children sadly.

Men and women have almost ceased to be human, cheated not only of their own lives but of their own deaths :

Sie sind gegeben unter hundert Quäler,  
und, angeschrien von jeder Stunde Schlag,  
kreisen sie einsam um die Hospitäler  
und warten angstvoll auf den Einlasstag.

\*G.W., II, 270-1. †G.W., II, 271.

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Dort is der Tod. Nicht jener, dessen Grösse  
sie in der Kindheit wundersam gestreift,—  
der kleine Tod, wie man ihn dort begreift;  
ihr eigener hängt grün und ohne Süsse  
wie eine Frucht in ihnen, die nicht reift.\*

They are distributed among a hundred tormentors, and,  
shrieked at by the stroke of every hour, circle solitarily  
around the hospitals and wait anxiously for admission-day.

There is death. Not the one whose greeting strangely  
touched them in childhood, but the little death, as under-  
stood by the people there; their own hangs in them green  
and without sweetness, like an unripening fruit.

O Herr, gib jedem seinen eignen Tod,  
das Sterben, das aus jenem Leben geht,  
darin er Liebe hatte, Sinn und Not.

Denn wir sind nur die Schale und das Blatt.  
Der grosse Tod, den jeder in sich hat,  
das ist die Frucht, um die sich alles dreht.†

- ✓ O Lord, give everyone his own death, the dying which  
comes out of that living in which he had love, sense and  
need.
- ✓ For we are only the husk and the leaf. The great death  
each has in himself, that is the fruit round which all  
revolves.

Mach Einen herrlich, Herr, mach Einen gross . . .

Mach, dass er seine Kindheit wieder weiss;  
das Unbewusste und das Wunderbare  
und seiner ahnungsvollen Anfangsjahre  
unendlich dunkelreichen Sagenkreis.

Und also heiss ihn seiner Stunde warten,  
da er den Tod gebären wird, den Harnn:  
allein und rauschend wie ein grosser Garten  
und ein Versammelter aus fern.‡

\*G.W., II, 273.      †G.W., II, 273.      ‡G.W., II, 275.

Make someone glorious, Lord, make someone great . . .

Make him know his childhood again; the unconscious and the wonderful and the saga-cycle, infinitely rich in darkness, of his forebodeful opening years.

✓ And so bid him await his hour when he shall bear death, the lord: alone and rustling like a great garden and like one assembled from afar.

✓ When Rilke, as he so often does, speaks in this strange way of death we must not think of the many minor poets who, weakly or sentimentally, have longed for death as an escape or a release, but rather—although the difference is still great—of Socrates declaring that life should be a preparation for death. The ‘great death’ of which Rilke speaks is not merely the visible, satisfying and memorable conclusion of a great life—Goethe calling for more light, Beethoven shaking his fist at the thunder, the ‘great and princely death’ of Kammerherr Brigge: it is simply the final transformation or transmutation in a life that has been continually ‘chargé du passé et gros de l’avenir,’ a life that has been continually gathering itself together and projecting itself forwards, never resting, always becoming, again and again ‘dying’ to the old self in order to put on the new. In this sense the law of life is also a law of death, and, since we must be continually ‘dying’ in order to ‘live,’ death may be regarded not only as the temporal but as the metaphysical end, as the fruit of which our lives are only the leaves. Our death is our  $\tau\acute{o} \tau\acute{\epsilon} \eta\nu \epsilon\lambda\upsilon\alpha\iota$ , and we may as appropriately speak of realizing our death as of realizing our life. ✓ And therefore, when Rilke says that the poor in great cities have been deprived of their deaths, that is simply the most pointed and concentrated way of saying that their lives have been deprived of all significance. They creep away to die in a hospital as a dog or a cat creeps away to die in its hole: they just disappear, go out, ‘like a vapour that vanisheth away.’ ✓ Nevertheless, although to-day the poor have only the misery without the grandeur of poverty, we cannot pray that they may become like the rich. For to-day the rich are no longer rich—not like the patriarchs, like the old princes, like the first sea-ports, which were able to extend and deepen life. No one can desire the days of the rich to come again: we can only

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pray that the poor may become really poor. And thus the deep significance of the title of this third part of the *Stunden-Buch*, 'The Book of Poverty and of Death,' gradually appears. For life as a perpetual transformation and transmutation, life as a continual preparation for death, as a series of deaths, involves renunciation, involves, in the highest and deepest sense, poverty; and Rilke has a superb poem on the poverty of God, which is also that of the poet, and of all those who, in Aristotle's phrase, would make themselves as Godlike as possible:

Du bist so arm wie eines Keimes Kraft  
in einem Mädchen, das es gern verbürge  
und sich die Lenden presst, dass sie erwürge  
das erste Atmen ihrer Schwangerschaft.  
Und du bist arm: so wie der Frühlingsregen,  
der selig auf der Städte Dächer fällt,  
und wie ein Wunsch, wenn Sträflinge ihn hegen  
in einer Zelle, ewig ohne Welt.  
Und wie die Kranken, die sich anders legen  
und glücklich sind; wie Blumen in Geleisen  
so traurig arm im irren Wind der Reisen;  
und wie die Hand, in die man weint, so arm . . .  
Und was sind Vögel gegen dich, die frieren,  
was ist ein Hund, der tagelang nicht frass,  
und was its gegen dich das Sichverlieren,  
das stille lange Traurigsein von Tieren,  
die man als Eingefangene vergass?  
Und alle Armen in den Nachtasylen,  
was sind sie gegen dich und deine Not?  
Sie sind nur kleine Steine, keine Mühlen,  
aber sie mahlen doch ein wenig Brot.

Du aber bist der tiefste Mittellose,  
der Bettler mit verborgenem Gesicht;  
du bist der Armut grosse Rose,  
die ewige Metamorphose  
des Goldes in das Sonnenlicht.

Du bist der leise Heimatlose,  
der nicht mehr einging in die Welt:

zu gross und schwer zu jeglichem Bedarfe.  
Du heulst im Sturm. Du bist wie eine Harfe,  
an welcher jeder Spielende zerschellt.\*

You are as poor as the strength of an embryo in a girl who would gladly hide it and who presses her thighs to strangle the first breathing of her pregnancy. And you are as poor as the spring rain that falls blessedly on the roofs of cities, and as a wish when convicts hug it in a cell, end without world. And like invalids, who lie in a different way and are happy; like flowers in railway-lines, so sadly poor in the strong wind of journeys; and as the hand into which one weeps . . . And what are birds that freeze compared with you, what is a dog that has not eaten all day, and what is the self-losing, the long still sadness of animals shut in and forgotten, compared with you? And what are all the poor in the night-shelters compared with you and your need? They are only little stones, no mills, although they do mill a little bread.

But you are the most deeply destitute, the beggar with the hidden face; you are the great rose of poverty, the eternal metamorphosis of gold into sunlight.

You are the gentle homeless one who would no longer fit into the world: too great and difficult for any kind of use. You howl in the storm. You are like a harp on which every player is shattered.

The book ends with a great invocation to St. Francis, of which these are the closing lines:

Und als er starb, so leicht wie ohne Namen,  
da war er ausgeteilt: sein Samen rann  
in Bächen, in den Bäumen sang sein Samen  
und sah ihn ruhig aus den Blumen an.  
Er lag und sang. Und als die Schwestern kamen,  
da weinten sie um ihren lieben Mann.

O wo ist er, der Klare, hingeklungen?  
Was fühlen ihn, den Jubelnden und Jungen,  
die Armen, welche harren, nicht von fern?

\*G.W., II, 283-4.



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Was steigt er nicht in ihre Dämmerungen—  
der Armut grosser Abendstern.\*

And when he died, light as without a name, he was distributed: his seed ran in brooks, his seed sang in the trees and looked peacefully at him from the flowers. He lay and sang. And when the sisters came they wept for their dear husband.

O where has the clear voice chimed away to? Why do not the waiting poor feel him, the young and the rejoicer, from afar?

Why does he not rise upon their twilights—the great evening-star of poverty.

This was what Paris gave him: the task of seeing, feeling, enduring, pursuing into its remotest and subtlest implications—just this. It was reality no less than 'Holy Russia' had been reality, and no less than the obscure terrors and intimations of his childhood, no less than the confused horror in his recollections of the Military School, to which he must now turn more and more. Having celebrated the beauty that yielded itself easily he must now celebrate the beauty that had to be wrestled with before it would reveal itself. He had learnt to give himself to what he trusted, now he must learn to give himself to what he feared. From his first arrival there until 1914 he regarded Paris both as his spiritual home and as the battlefield where his spiritual conflicts were to be fought and won. Every now and then his health and nerves would collapse under the strain of his self-imposed asceticism, his intense, prolonged observation and meditation, his lonely struggles with the most secret and subtle memories, intuitions, intimations, fears and hopes of his own nature and of human nature, and he would seek relief in journeys and visits which, during the long period of restlessness that followed the completion, in 1910, of *Malte Laurids Brigge*, became longer and more frequent—Central Europe, Belgium, Scandinavia, Italy, Spain, Egypt; but, sooner or later, he nearly always came to realize that they were distractions, that he could profit by them only if he could contrive to be alone and undisturbed, that company and conversation were temptations

\**G.W.*, II, 292-3.

to waste power that should be reserved for creation, and that he must return to Paris and solitude. And after the War, before he was able to settle down to the last work of his life, he had to visit Paris in order, as he said, to re-establish contact with his past, to convince himself that the main line of his development had been right.

From 1905 to 1906 he lived in Rodin's house at Meudon, and, as some return for this hospitality, suggested that he should relieve him as much as possible of the burden of dealing with his vast correspondence. The self-imposed task made enormous demands on Rilke's time, and we can see from his letters that the collar was beginning to chafe; but unfortunately the parting that was inevitable seems to have been precipitated by some misunderstanding and want of sympathy on Rodin's part, although later a complete reconciliation was effected. What he learnt from Rodin was complementary to what he learnt from Paris; indeed, he always said that it was Rodin who helped him to learn from Paris. We have already noticed that he had begun to train his power of *seeing* as well as his power of feeling, and above all things Rodin taught him to *see*, to force his emotions to cluster and concentrate about particular things and images instead of pouring themselves out in hymns and pæans as in the *Stunden-Buch*; not merely about easy and obvious and congenial things, as in the early volumes and, to some extent, in the first edition of the *Buch der Bilder* (Book of Pictures or Images, 1902), but about things that had first to be created or re-created. The emotion, in fact, was to *become* the thing, not merely hover about it like an atmosphere. The poet was not merely to see a thing, not merely to describe a thing, but to *become* a thing, or, rather, to create from the thing and from his contemplation of it a third and independent thing, a work of art. Rodin taught him that 'il faut *toujours* travailler,' and not merely in moments of inspiration; and although he was unable to follow this advice in regard to the actual process of creation, which with him was always spontaneous and 'inspired,' he was able to make a continual preparation and preparedness for creation his daily work. He recognized that there were essential differences between work in clay and work in words, but he was convinced that somehow he must follow the example of Rodin: 'not by

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transforming my art into sculpture, but by an internal regulation of the artistic process; it is not modelling I must learn from him, but the deep concentration required by modelling.\* Rodin gave him a new sense of the inexhaustible richness of nature, of the infinite significance of 'die Dinge,' of the immense value of just looking steadily at things without prejudices or preconceptions, patiently waiting for them to yield up their secrets.

Always whatever he looks at and surrounds with looking is for him the only thing, the world, in which everything takes place ; if he is modelling a hand, it is alone in space, and there is nothing except a hand; and God in six days made nothing but a hand, and poured out the waters around it and arched the heavens above it; and rested over it when everything was finished, and there was a glory and a hand.†

Only things talk to me. Rodin's things, the things on the gothic cathedrals, classical things—all things that are perfect things. They refer me to the prototypes; to the stirring lively world, seen simply and without interpretation as the occasion for things.‡

The two great records of the experiences of these years are *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, 'The Note-Books of Malte Laurids Brigge,' begun in 1904, in Rome, and completed in 1910, and the *Neue Gedichte*, 'New Poems,' 1907 and 1908, of which the second part is dedicated 'A mon grand ami, Auguste Rodin.'

'The Note-Books of Malte Laurids Brigge' are supposed to have been written by a young Dane who is slowly being destroyed by Paris, struggling with questions he cannot answer and terrors he cannot subdue. As his health becomes undermined and his nerves sensitized to the point of agony, the ordinary, conventional boundaries between the real and the unreal, truth and illusion, become more and more indeterminate. The nameless fears and anxieties of childhood come thronging back; the smallest details of life take on a strange and sinister significance. As he sinks deeper and deeper into

\**Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 118. †*Op. cit.*, II, 111.

‡*Op. cit.*, II, 116.

poverty he begins to feel a new kinship with the poor and outcast, is convinced that they are beginning to recognize him as one of themselves, and broods for days over the problem of their mysteriously preserved existence. It is true that the book is very largely autobiographical, and that the experiences which suggested many of its most famous sections—the hospitals, the pencil-seller, the man with the tick, the medical student with the paralytic eyelid—are recorded in Rilke's letters. Nevertheless, Malte must not be taken as a portrait of Rilke, for Rilke, unlike Malte, was able to endure 'the terrible insight' in the confidence and resolution of being able, one day, to 'sing of glory and joy to assenting angels.' His own view of the matter is sufficiently indicated in his Letters: the book, he says, 'will only give real pleasure to those who try, as it were, to read it *against the stream*.'\*

Above all, never overlook the fact that the only reason why his inconsolabilities are transferred as such to the reader is because the pure, innocent power that breaks out in them chances (and this is, strictly speaking, no more than chance) to be involved in the course of a decline. The fact that poor Malte is destroyed by it is his affair, and need not trouble us further. The one important fact is that Immensity does not disdain to concern itself so intimately with us; this is what, at a certain period, would have been called the moral of the book, the justification of its existence. These note-books, in applying a measure to very deeply-accumulated sorrows, suggest to what height happiness, achieved with the fulness of these same forces, might ascend.†

Rilke's letters during these years are full of references to *Malte Laurids* and full of matters that ultimately found their way into the book. It grew as he grew; he put into it the whole of his insight and experience. There is one passage in particular which I should like to refer to, because, read together with Rilke's own comments upon it, it shows not only how close was the connexion between this book and his own life, but also what he was really trying to do, what was his conception of

\**Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914*, 196-7. †*Op. cit.*, 297-8.

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art. The passage is entitled, in a foot-note, 'Ein Briefentwurf,' 'Draft of a Letter.' Malte says that Paris is a city of remarkable temptations, and that he must admit that he has in some measure succumbed to them. This has produced extraordinary changes in his character, his outlook, his whole life. 'An entirely different comprehension of everything has been developed in me under these influences, certain differences are there which separate me from people more than all that has gone before. A changed world. A new life full of new meanings.' He thinks he now understands Baudelaire's poem, *La Charogne*: 'What was he to do when this came in his way? It was his task to see in this horrible, apparently only repulsive, thing that existence which is valid throughout all existence. Selection and rejection are not possible.' And he concludes: 'My God, if something of this could be imparted. But would it then exist, would it then exist? No, it exists only at the cost of being alone.\*' Malte himself was unable to endure this new vision. Just before transcribing the *Petit Poème en Prose* and the 30th chapter of *Job*, in which, as we have seen, Rilke himself used to find comfort, he had written:

In spite of all fear I am ultimately like one standing before something great, and I remember that earlier it was often like this in me before I began to write. But this time I shall be written. I am the impression that will be transformed. Oh, only a little is required, and I could understand and sanction it all. Only a step, and my deep misery would be blessedness. But I cannot take this step, I have fallen and can't pick myself up again, for I am broken.†

On October 19th, 1907, Rilke wrote to his wife:

You surely remember . . . that passage from the Note-Books of Malte Laurids about Baudelaire and his poem 'The Carrion.' I could not help thinking that without this poem the whole development towards objective statement, which we now think we recognize in Cézanne, could never have begun; that poem in its inexorability had to be there first. Artistic observation had first to make such a conquest

\**G.W.*, V, 88-90. †*G.W.*, V, 65-6.

of itself as to be able to see even in the horrible and apparently only repulsive that existence, which, together with all other existence, *counts*. Aversion from any kind of existence is as little permitted to the creator as selection: a single withdrawal at any time thrusts him from the state of grace, makes him wholly and entirely sinful . . . Behind this devotion, in a small way at first, begins holiness: the simple life of a love that has endured, that without ever praising itself on that account advances to everything, unaccompanied, inconspicuously wordlessly. Proper work, plenitude of tasks, all begin for the first time behind this endurance, and anyone who has been unable to progress that far will indeed get a sight of the Virgin Mary in heaven, of a few saints and minor prophets, of King Saul and Charles the Bold:—but of Hokusai and Leonardo, of Li Tai Pe and Villon, of Verhaeren, Rodin, Cézanne—and even of God, what he learns even there will only be hearsay.

And all at once (and for the first time) I understand the fate of Malte Laurids. Is it not this, that this test was too much for him, that he did not pass it in reality, although in idea he was convinced of its necessity, so much so that he sought it out so long instinctively that it finally clung to him and never forsook him? The book of Malte Laurids, when at last it shall be written, will be nothing but the book of this insight, exemplified in one for whom it was too tremendous. Perhaps he did pass, too: for he wrote the death of the Kammerherr; but he remained behind like a Raskolnikov, used up by his deed, ceasing to act at the very moment when action should have begun, so that the newly conquered freedom turned against him and tore him, defenceless as he was, to pieces.\*

Rilke declared that it was Rodin who helped him to understand Paris, enabled him to cope with it. The influence of Paris and the influence of Rodin are two distinguishable but inseparable moments in the experience of these years: nevertheless, we may say that on the whole *Malte Laurids Brigge* is

\**Briefe aus den Jahren 1906-1907*, 393-5.

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the book of Paris and the *Neue Gedichte* the book of Rodin, to whom indeed the second part is dedicated; for it is above all in the *Neue Gedichte* that we see him trying to do with words what Rodin did with marble and clay. In these poems Rilke is above all striving after what he would call *objectivity* (*Sachlichkeit*); in comparison with them he considered his earlier poems inferior because they were subjective. This does not mean that there is less of himself in them—in a sense there is far more; but his self does not obtrude, it has been transmuted, metamorphosed into them. In August, 1907, he wrote to his wife of the first part: 'It is a book: *work*, the transition from inspiration that comes to that which is summoned and seized.'\* And in a letter written in October of the same year what he says about Cézanne's paintings is equally applicable to the *Neue Gedichte*:

One also notices, better every time, how necessary it was to get beyond even love; it is indeed natural for one to love each of these things, when one makes it; but if one shows this, one makes it less well; one *judges* it instead of *saying* it. One stops being impartial, and the best, love, remains outside the work, does not enter it, remains untransmuted beside it: this was how impressionist painting arose (which is in no way better than naturalistic). One painted: I love this; instead of painting: here it is. Whereby everyone is forced to see for himself whether I have loved it . . . In the poems (*Neue Gedichte*) there are instinctive tendencies towards a similar objectivity.†

A second edition of the *Buch der Bilder* was published in 1906, and in the thirty-seven additional poems, nearly all of them written after Rilke had settled in Paris, it is impossible not to notice the great progress towards objectivity. Very few of the original collection can stand comparison with such poems as *Kindheit*, *Die Konfirmanden*, *Das Abendmal*, *Pont du Carrousel*, *Die Aschanti*. Nevertheless, between even the best of these additional poems and the *Neue Gedichte* Rilke recognized a most important distinction.‡ Like Beethoven when he composed the 'Appassionata' he felt that he was striking out a new road. Compare

\**Op. cit.*, 305. †*Op. cit.*, 378-9. ‡*Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914*, 156-160.

*Die Aschanti* with *Der Panther*: the first is a fine poem, but the poet still, to some extent, stands outside and gesticulates; in the other he has become completely absorbed in his subject. We feel that the lions are obviously symbolic of something, of an attitude to life: we do not feel this about the panther—not immediately: ultimately, perhaps. Compare *Der Einsame* and that superb poem *Der Schauende*, where the poet speaks of himself and of his attitude to life *directly*, with the many poems in the *Neue Gedichte* where he has found symbols for his ideal of the poet and his life of renunciation and receptivity: *Der Ölbaumgarten*, *Buddha*, *Aus dem Leben eines Heiligen*, *Der Fremde*, *Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes*, *L'Ange du Méridien*. Here the symbolism, so far from being thrust upon us, is perhaps only felt after many readings. Here Rilke has not noticed things because they struck him at once as symbolic: he has looked at them for their own sakes, and his steady gaze has revealed to him, among other things, himself. He had been able to recognize and overcome that

ancient curse of poets,  
being sorry for themselves instead of saying;  
forever passing judgment on their feeling  
instead of shaping it; for ever thinking  
that what is sad or joyful in themselves  
is what they know and what in poems may fitly  
be mourned or celebrated. Invalids,  
using a language full of woefulness  
to tell us where it hurts, instead of sternly  
transforming into words those selves of theirs,  
as imperturbable cathedral carvers  
transposed themselves into the constant stone.

He would spend hours, days, in the Louvre, in the Jardin d'Acclimatation or Jardins des Plantes, waiting for pictures, statues and animals to yield up their secrets (*Pietà*, *Sankt Sebastian*, *Die Kurtisane*, *Archaischer Torso Apollos*, *Der Panther*, *Die Gazelle*, *Die Flamingos*); hours in streets and gardens and squares in Paris and abroad, observing the activity of the present and feeling the pressure of the past (*Das Karussell*, *Irre im Garten*, *Fremde Familie*, *Der Blinde*, *Der Balkon*, *Die Kathedrale*, *Gott im Mittelalter*, *Der Platz*); hours over his favourite books, the Bible



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and the Lives of the Saints, finding there 'expression for something within,' and creating, in a manner that seems for the first time to give a meaning to that threadbare *cliché* of Renaissance criticism, 'speaking pictures' (*Josuas Landtag, Der Ölbaumgarten, Tröstung des Elia, Ein Prophet, Esther, Die Versuchung, Aus dem Leben eines Heiligen, Das Einhorn*). Nothing like these poems had been written before; nothing like them has been written since. Rilke has been called a Symbolist, but his words always have a definite and finally discoverable meaning, and are symbolic only in the sense of being evocative of particular things and experiences; and although his poems often point beyond themselves, and after repeated readings may be found almost infinitely symbolic, they also stand firmly in their places, like Rodin's statues, as independent and self-sufficient works of art. He might almost be said to begin where most Symbolists end: he is a master both of the music and of the associations of words, but words and images are always a means, never an end. Much as we admire the process we admire the result still more, and the reason why we return again and again to these poems is the variety and intensity of the experiences behind them: they fulfil the requirements of that great description of poetry in *Malte Laurids Brigge*:

✓ But alas! one does not get very far with verses if one writes them too early. One should wait and collect sense and sweetness during a whole lifetime and if possible a long one, and then, right at the end, one might perhaps be able to write ten lines that were good. For verses are not, as people suppose, feelings (one has those soon enough)—they are experiences. For the sake of a verse one must see many cities, men and things, one must know animals, one must feel how birds fly, and understand the gestures with which little flowers open in the morning. One must be able to look back upon roads in unknown regions, on unexpected meetings and on partings that one long fore-saw, on days of childhood that are still unexplained, on parents whom one had to hurt, if they brought one a pleasure and one did not comprehend it (it was a pleasure for someone else),—on childish illnesses, that begin so strangely with so many deep and difficult changes, on days in

still, subdued rooms and on mornings by the sea, on all that the sea can mean, on seas, on nights of travel that rushed away on high and flew with all the stars—and even if one is able to think of all that, it is not yet sufficient. One must have memories of many nights of love, of which not one was like another, of cries of women in labour and of light, white sleeping women in childbed, who are closing. But one must also have been beside the dying, must have sat beside the dead in the room with the open window and the intermittent sounds. And still, even to have memories is not sufficient. If there are many of them one must be able to forget them, and one must have the great patience to wait till they return. For the memories themselves are not yet what is required. Not till they become blood within us, look and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguishable from ourselves, not till then is it possible, in some very rare hour, for the first word of a verse to arise in their midst and to proceed from them.\*

### III

He felt that the completion of *Malte Laurids Brigge*, in 1910, marked the end of a period in his life, and that it would be impossible to go on writing as though nothing had happened. For a time he had a hankering after what is called 'ordinary life'; he even mentions the possibility of forsaking literature for some other profession, and when he finally rejects this idea as absurd he is driven almost to despair by the apparent impossibility of finding a new outlet for his creative activity; for, as he declares, he cannot go on writing mechanically, exploiting what he considers to be his defects. 'It is glorious to behold a thing, terrible to be it.' He had so completely identified himself with other things and experiences, so completely renounced his own personality, that between the completion of one task and the beginning of another he was almost torn to pieces by a thousand distracting claims. 'Now, perhaps, I shall learn to be a little human,' he says, and admits that hitherto his art has been concerned almost exclusively with

\**G.W.*, V, 25-7.

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'things.' He who had made himself so independent of human companionship now found himself longing for it. He sought relief and inspiration in travel, to North Africa and Egypt (November 1910—March 1911), to Spain (October 1912—February 1913), this last a journey he undertook with great hopes, thinking it might perhaps be as significant in his development as the Russian journey; it gave him much, but not what he had expected. All his problems are expressed with a kind of humorously exaggerated despair in a letter to his friend, Lou Andreas-Salomé, written in January, 1912. 'I am too much on the side of my own nature, I have never wanted anything from it except what it gave, greatly and happily, from its very own impulses, almost above and beyond me. The utmost realized in the other way is that one is able to go on writing perpetually; that is nothing to me.' Although deep within him everything is chaos he can cut a good figure in conversation, 'and in this sense people will always be falsehood for me, something that galvanizes my lifelessness without curing it.' Nevertheless, there are certain personal recollections which he clings to, insignificant as they may seem to anyone else:

Believe me, during the long, complicated solitude, often pushed to the last extreme, in which Malte Laurids was written, it was absolutely clear to me that a considerable part of the strength with which I met it derived from certain evenings in Capri, when nothing happened except that I sat with two elderly women and a young girl and watched their handiwork and sometimes, in conclusion, had an apple peeled for me by one of them. There was no trace of fate between us, there was no investigation, how far just these people were necessary in order that what did arise should arise; it has no name, but I experienced through it very nearly something of the mystical nutritiousness of the Last Supper: while it was still going on I knew that it was giving me powers, and later, during the toilsome loneliness, I recognized those powers among all others; it was strange, they lasted longest.

Dear Lou, when I wrote recently that I almost hoped for people I meant that I have not since re-experienced *this* and infinitely need it. Can't you imagine that someone

exists who can give this, involuntarily, without intending to do so, finding their satisfaction in just streaming out presence and expecting nothing? . . . Perhaps everyone who gets to hear of this will ask in the first place what I propose to contribute to such a relationship myself; I must then admit that I can really respond with nothing, except perhaps with my warmer and more cheerful existence, as it possibly revealed itself then to those women at Capri.\*

Two days later he wrote to another friend (as a matter of fact, the 'young girl' of the evenings in Capri):

Artistic work has many dangers and often in a particular case will not admit of very clear recognition, whether one is going on or whether one is being driven back by the pressure of immense forces with which one has become involved. What is then required is to wait and hold out, and this has always been very difficult for me, because I have neglected everything apart from work, with the result that during such intervals everything is missing, even the place where such a decision may be got over. I have really never watched more passionately than during the last year those whose business is something solid, uniform, something that one always 'can,' something more dependent on understanding, reflection, insight, experience—I don't know what, than on those violent tensions of inner experience over which no one has control. They are not mere exaltations, certainly not, otherwise they could not accomplish such indescribable reality in the spirit, but in their thrust and recoil they are of such exorbitance that one would often think the heart could not endure such extremity from both sides.†

These two letters were written from Schloss Duino, on what was then the Austrian coast, where Rilke stayed, mostly alone, from October, 1911, until May, 1912, at the invitation of one of his dearest and loyallest friends, Princess Marie of

\**Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914*, 156-160.  
1907-1914, 165-6.

†*Briefe aus den Jahren*

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Thurn and Taxis-Hohenlohe. One morning he received a letter that required an immediate and careful answer. To settle his thoughts he went out into the storm and paced to and fro along the bastions, the sea raging two hundred feet below. Suddenly he stopped, for it seemed that from the midst of the storm a voice had called to him:

Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel  
Ordnungen?

✓ Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic  
orders?

- ✓ His endurance had been rewarded; the god had spoken at last. On the twenty-third of February, 1912, his friend received the first of the *Duineser Elegien*, the first line of which had been given by this voice from the storm. The second was written shortly afterwards, and a beginning was made with the third, which was completed in Paris in 1913; but it was not until 1922 that Rilke was able to conclude the task so strangely begun. There were further doubts and hesitations and fierce inner conflicts, but in moments of insight he was now able to recognize and accept his destiny. The return to humanity he had hoped for after the completion of *Malte Laurids* was to be different from what he had supposed: he was to return, not to find a home and a resting place, but only further tasks, further problems, that had to be taken away and brooded over in solitude. He returned to us in order to set out once again, to establish new outposts in the mystery and darkness that surround us: to ponder on our true relationships to that world of 'things' which had occupied him for so long, to the half-forgotten secrets of our childhood, to the elemental and yet so little understood experiences of love and death, to all those surmisings and intimations and apprehensions, inexplicable, inexpressible, and yet so infinitely real, that hover just outside the little circle of our daily lives. If the *Neue Gedichte* were his 'Appassionata,' the *Duineser Elegien* and the *Sonette an Orpheus* were his last quartets. In December, 1912, he wrote to Princess Marie from Spain:

To-day, as I watched these mountains, these slopes, opened in the purest air as though intended to be sung from, I could not help saying to myself, to what joy this would have impelled me even three years ago, how it would have transformed me into sheer joy. Now it is as though my heart had moved miles away, I see many things making a start and setting out in that direction—but I do not experience their arrival. Alas! I have not yet quite got over expecting the 'nouvelle opération' from some human hand; and yet why, since my fate is, as it were, to pass by the human, to reach the uttermost, the edge of the earth, as recently in Cordova, where a little ugly dog, in an advanced state of preparation for motherhood, came up to me; it was an undistinguished animal, and certainly full of very casual puppies, about which no fuss will have been made; but difficult as it was for her, she came over to me, as we were quite alone, and raised her eyes, enlarged by care and self-seclusion, and begged for my glance,—and truly in hers there was everything that transcends the individual and passes, I can't say where—into the future or into the incomprehensible; the result was that she obtained a piece of sugar from my coffee, but incidentally, oh so incidentally, we read the mass together, as it were; the transaction in itself was nothing but giving and taking, but the meaning and the earnestness and our whole mutual understanding were boundless. And yet such things can only happen on earth: when all is said and done, it is good to have made the passage here willingly, even though unsurely, even though guiltily, even though not at all heroically,—at the end one will be wonderfully prepared for relationships with the divine.\*

In January, 1913, he wrote to his faithful friend and publisher Anton Kippenberg, of the Inselverlag, who had believed in him from the first and without whose generous support during the unproductive years the later works would probably never have been written:

*\*Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914, 258-9.*

## INTRODUCTION

... my most hopeful insight is more or less this, that since 'Malte' the same thing is happening both physically and spiritually, a process of turning over in the whole soil of my being, in the course of which uppermost is becoming undermost: times when the best thing would be to have no consciousness at all; for there the continual subversion of such goings-on can only express itself as torture and abandonment. The appearance of the *Elegies* last year has drawn me a little into the confidence of what may be establishing itself, infinitely slowly, at the expense of such great devastation, and during the worst days I find, again and again, a remnant of patience, not patience with myself (that has long been exhausted) but patience towards God, if one can say so, a quiet resolute desire for his measure.\*

A new period of creative activity was interrupted by the War and military service. He was called up in November 1915; in December he presented himself in Vienna, where, after three weeks of barrack life and drill, under which his health collapsed, he was given clerical work in the War Office until June 1916, when, as the result of a petition signed by numerous German writers, he was released from further military service and returned to Munich. In April, 1917, he told Kippenberg that it would take him a long time to get over his experiences in Vienna, so horribly like the Military School. He had been like a tree buried upside down—a tree ready to blossom and bear as almost never before. And then, there was the *general* experience, the senseless horror of it all, to be endured by this man whose deepest feelings were rooted in countries fighting against his own. In July, 1918, he wrote to Kippenberg:

You write that the face of the world, externally and internally, has fundamentally altered. What *I* notice, dear friend, is still only the unhealable breaking-off of what was, in which I, in my way, shared the more deeply because for me it was crossing over into the openest future. The longer the chaotic interruption lasts the more I see that my task will be to continue what has been in

\**Briefe an seinen Verleger*, 156.

purest undisconcertedness and inexhaustible recollection ; even if the conditions out of which I have formed myself have, after all, expired, I think I have so timelessly understood their mandate that even now I can still regard it as inviolable and ultimate.\*

In 1919 he went to Switzerland, staying as a guest with various friends (throughout his life providence had supplied abundance of congenial hosts) and lecturing. Next year he wrote to Kippenberg that he longed once more to be a stranger among strangers, his unspoken language shining in complete contrast as the material for his work, but that he knew that the next move must be not outwards but inwards. In the Autumn of 1920 he found it necessary to revisit Paris, to discover 'whether the continuity of my innermost feeling can ever be re-won.' In November he moved into a castle which had been lent him for six months, but in the following May he wrote that, in comparison with the degree of settledness he had been prepared for, the six months had shrunk to the dream-frame of a night; he had only just crossed the ante-room of his 'inwardness.' At last, in August, 1921, he settled down in the Château de Muzot—a simple, unadorned little tower, though dignified with the name of 'Château'—at Raron, near Sierre, in the valley of the Rhône. In December he asked Kippenberg to defer his proposed visit till the Spring, 'because I should very much like, for a few months, as was once the case at Duino, to belong, without a single turn outwards, to contemplation, blindly and uninterruptedly to it *alone*.'† Kippenberg put off his visit, and on the evening of the ninth of February, 1922, Rilke wrote to him as follows :

My dear friend,

late, and although I can hardly hold the pen any longer, after a few days' tremendous obedience of spirit,—it must . . . to you it must still be told to-day, even now, before I try to sleep, that :

I am over the summit!

At last! The 'Elegies' are there. And can appear this year (or whenever it may suit you). Nine big ones about the

\**Briefe an seinen Verleger*, 273-4. †*Op. cit.*, 350.



## INTRODUCTION

same size as those you already know; and then a second part, belonging to their orbit, which I call 'Fragments,' single poems, related to the larger in time and tone.

So.

Dear friend, now at last I shall breathe, and proceed calmly to something manageable. For this was larger than life,—I have groaned during these days and nights like that time in Duino,—but, even after that wrestling there,—I never knew that *such* a storm of mind and heart could come over one! That one endures it! that one endures it.

Enough, it's there.

I have been out in the cold moonlight and stroked little Muzot like a great animal—the old walls, that have granted it to me. And destroyed\* Duino.

The whole shall be called:

The Duino Elegies.

People will get accustomed to the name. I think. And: my dear friend: this, that *you* have granted it to me, have been patient over it with me: ten years! Thanks! And always believed: Thanks!†

Two days later he communicated the great news to Princess Marie: 'And so I've endured up to this, through and through it all. Through it all. And it was this that was needed. *Only* this.'

Immediately before and after this completion of the Elegies he also wrote the fifty-five *Sonette an Orpheus*—Orpheus the eternal spirit of poetry, born again in every true poet, whom he compels, frail and limited human being though he is, to attempt to transcend the limitations of humanity and to assume the god-like task of re-creating a world that is dumb until his song gives it a voice: to unite what man has parted, words and things, men and things, the inner and the outer world, past and present, childhood and age, life and death, the living and the dead.

I do not propose at this time to offer any further comment or criticism on those profoundest of modern poems, the *Duineser Elegien* and the *Sonette an Orpheus*. I will only assure the reader who has not yet attempted them that, however dark, they may

\*By the Italian Army.

†*Briefe an seinen Verleger*, 354-5.

appear to him on a first reading, they are dark only through excess of light, light that will reveal itself only after careful and loving study both of these poems and of Rilke's other works, more especially of his letters. To those who ask for something more the best answer will perhaps be found in *Die Erwachsene*, one of the most beautiful of the *Neue Gedichte*, where the confirmation veil, falling upon the girl's upturned face, replies vaguely to all her questions:

In dir, du Kindgewesene, in dir..

In you, you once a child, in you.

Rilke now felt that what had been given him to say had been said. A few more poems, a few more translations were written, but his delicate health had been finally broken by the tremendous strains imposed upon it by himself and his jealous god. He died at the end of December, 1926, and was buried in the churchyard of Raron. The epitaph, which he composed for himself, reads as follows:

Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust,  
Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel Lidern.

Rose, oh pure contradiction, delight  
of being nobody's sleep under so many lids.

## EARLY POEMS



**T**HERE, where the line of cottages grows thin,  
and the new, narrow-chested houses thrust  
through crazy scaffolding and choking dust  
to ask each other where the fields begin:

pale and half-hearted is the spring down there,  
the summer swelters behind plank and paling;  
children and cherry-trees are always ailing,  
and only Autumn breathes another air,

distant and reconciling: the soft bloom  
of evening melts into the lifting smoke;  
sheep shimmer, and the shepherd in his cloak  
leans on the last lamp-post in the gloom.

## THE PICTURE BOOK

THE KNIGHT

**T**HE knight arrayed in his steel-dark mail  
rides out to the rustling world:  
And without are all things: day and dale,  
friend and foe and the hall-mates' hail,  
May and the maid and the grove and the grail,  
and banners of God who cannot fail  
in every street unfurled.

But the knight is riding in armour whereunder,  
behind the darkest enringing,  
crouches Death, who must wonder and wonder:  
When will the sword be springing  
open this iron embrace,  
strange sword enfranchising  
me from the hiding-place  
where dolefully day by day  
I am buckled by cramp and sting,  
that at last I may have some space  
and play  
and sing.

GIRLS

**W**HAT you are within your lone existence  
certain poets tremblingly express;  
learning life through you as from a distance,  
as the evenings, through the stars' persistence,  
grow inured to everlastingness.

None may ever lawfully surrender,  
should he seek the woman in the maid;  
for his mind can only read or render  
you as maids: the feeling in your tender  
wrists would snap beneath brocade.

Leave him once more silently secluded  
where he suddenly beheld you bloom  
in those garden walks he'll now resume,  
by the waiting seats where shadows brooded,  
where a lute was hanging in the room.

Go . . . it's getting dark. His feeling reaches  
for your voices and your forms no more.  
He loves lone paths that stretch on far before,  
and no white flitting under the dark beeches,  
and most of all the dumb room and shut door.  
. . . Now your voices mingle from afar  
with the voices he would fain forget,  
and his tender memories with regret  
that so many see you where you are.



MUSIC

WHAT are you playing, boy ?—Through the gardens go  
like many footsteps, whispering commands.  
What are you playing, boy ? See, your soul's in bands,  
wrapt in the reeds of Syrinx, my sweet foe.

Why do you tempt her ? Sound is like a prison  
wherein she lingers hopelessly and longs;  
strong is your life, but stronger is your song's,  
to greet your longing sobbingly uprisen.

Give her some silence, send her softly swaying  
back to that world so manifold and flowing  
where she lived widely, wakefully, wisely growing,  
before you prisoned her in your tender playing.

Already the beat of her wings is not so strong:  
dreamer, you'll spoil her flight and scatter her treasure,  
making her sweet fleet pinions, sawn by song,  
no longer able to lift her aloft and along  
when I shall call her over my walls to pleasure.

THE ANGELS

**M**OUTHS that are all so tired, tired;  
pellucid souls without a seam.  
And something guiltily desired  
goes sometimes fluttering through their dream.

Like indistinguishable causes  
growing in God's garden silently,  
or many intervals and pauses  
within his might and melody:

until the waiting air engages  
their spread wings, when the wind they raise  
blows strong as though beyond the ages  
God's sculptor-fingers turned the pages  
in the dark book of first essays.

## CHILDHOOD

**T**HE school's long stream of time and tediousness  
winds slowly on, through torpor, through dismay.  
O loneliness, O time that creeps away . . .  
Then out at last: the streets ring loud and gay,  
and in the big white squares the fountains play,  
and in the parks the world seems measureless.—  
And to pass through it all in children's dress,  
with others, but quite otherwise than they:—  
O wondrous time, O time that fleets away,  
O loneliness!

And out into it all to gaze and gaze:  
men, women, women, men in blacks and greys,  
and children, brightly dressed, but differently;  
and here a house, and there a dog, maybe,  
and fear and trust changing in subtle ways:—  
O grief uncaused, O dream, O dark amaze,  
O still-unsounded sea!

And then with bat and ball and hoop to playing  
in parks where the bright colours softly fade,  
brushing against the grown-ups without staying  
when ball or hoop their alien walks invade;  
but when the twilight comes, with little, swaying  
footsteps going home with unrejected aid:—  
O thoughts that fade into the darkness, straying  
alone, afraid!

And hours on end by the grey pond-side kneeling  
with little sailing-boat and elbows bare;  
forgetting it, because one like it's stealing  
below the ripples, but with sails more fair;  
and, having still to spare, to share some feeling  
with the small sinking face caught sight of there:—  
Childhood! Winged likenesses half-guessed at, wheeling,  
oh, where, oh, where ?

A RECOLLECTION OF CHILDHOOD

**R**ICH darkness round the room was streaming  
where the boy sat, quite hidden in himself.  
His mother came, a dream within his dreaming,  
and a glass quivered on a silent shelf.  
Feeling the room had given her away,  
she kissed him—"So it's you"—and let him be . . .  
Then both glanced at the piano timidly,  
for often of an evening she would play,  
and had a song that drew him deep and clung.

He sat there very still. His large gaze hung  
upon her hand which, under bright rings bowing,  
as though with labour through a snow-drift ploughing,  
over the white keys softly swung.

THE BOY

I'd like, above all, to be one of those  
who drive with wild black horses through the night,  
torches like hair uplifted in affright  
when the great wind of their wild hunting blows.  
I'd like to stand in front as in a boat,  
tall, like a long floating flag unrolled.  
And dark, but with a helmet made of gold,  
restlessly flashing. And behind to ride  
ten other looming figures side by side,  
with helmets all unstable like my own,  
now clear like glass, now old and blank like stone.  
And one to stand by me and blow us space  
with the brass trumpet that can blaze and blare,  
blowing a black solitude through which we tear  
like dreams that speed too fast to leave a trace.  
Houses behind us fall upon their knees,  
alleys cringe crookedly before our train,  
squares break in flight: we summon and we seize:  
we ride, and our great horses rush like rain.

THE LAST SUPPER

AMAZED, bewildered, they are gathered round him,  
whose pondered resolution comes to rest,  
withdrawing him from all the ties that bound him—  
a stranger gliding by with thoughts unguessed.  
He feels the old bleak loneliness draw near  
in which the deep command was comprehended;  
again the olive slope shall be ascended,  
and those that love him shall depart in fear.  
To the last meal of all they are invited;  
and (as a shot will scare some new-alighted  
flock from the wheat) their feeding hands, affrighted  
from the dealt portions by his prophecy,  
fly up to him and flutter in despair  
round the round table to escape. But he,  
like the still twilight hour, is everywhere.

PONT DU CARROUSEL

THAT blind man standing by the parapet,  
grey as some nameless empire's boundary stone,  
he is perhaps that something unbeknown  
to which the planetary clock is set,  
the silent centre of the starry ways;  
for all around him strives and struts and strays.

Flag with inflexible deliberation  
above our many wavering faiths unfurled;  
the sombre entrance to the underworld  
among a superficial generation.

THE SOLITARY

**L**IKE one who's sailed an unfamiliar sea  
I move among these all so much at home;  
upon their tables stands their day's whole sum,  
but my horizon's full of fantasy.

A world may reach into my gaze, revealing  
cold planetary space on every side;  
they hate to see a solitary feeling,  
and all their words have long been occupied.

The things I brought with me from far away  
seem rarities where everything's so tame;  
though here they cower and hold their breath for  
shame,  
in their great homeland they are beasts of prey.



THE ASHANTI

JARDIN D'ACCLIMATATION

NO vision of strange lands, remote, entrancing,  
no feeling of brown women merrily  
out of flowing, falling garments dancing.

No wild piercing foreign melody.  
No songs from deep within the blood arising,  
and no blood that cries unceasingly.

No brown girls delicious dreams devising,  
in tropic languor large and lithe reclined;  
no eyes like sudden flash of spears surprising,

no flashing teeth by laughing lips defined.  
And a rare contemptuous comprehension  
of the vanity of white mankind.

And I stared in terrified attention.

To their own loyalties; oh, how much truer!  
Caged and cornered in this foreign land,  
out of harmony with all the newer,  
alien things they do not understand;  
sunk into themselves like steady fire  
slowly burning to an ashen cone,  
scorning new adventures, they retire  
into their own mighty blood, alone.

AUTUMN

THE leaves are falling, falling as from far,  
as though above were withering farthest gardens;  
they fall with a denying attitude.

And night by night, down into solitude,  
the heavy earth falls far from every star.

We are all falling. This hand's falling too—  
all have this falling-sickness none withstands.

And yet there's always One whose gentle hands  
this universal falling can't fall through.

ANNUNCIATION  
(WORDS OF THE ANGEL)

**Y**OU are not nearer God than we,  
and we are far at best,  
yet through your hands most wonderfully  
his glory's manifest.  
From woman's sleeves none ever grew  
so ripe, so shimmeringly:  
I am the day, I am the dew,  
you, Lady, are the Tree.

Pardon, now my long journey's done,  
I had forgot to say  
what he who sat as in the sun,  
grand in his gold array,  
told me to tell you, pensive one  
(space has bewildered me).  
I, the beginner, have begun,  
you, Lady, are the Tree.

I spread my wings out wide and rose,  
the space around grew less;  
your little house quite overflows  
with my abundant dress.  
But still you keep your solitude  
and hardly notice me:  
I'm but a breeze within the wood,  
you, Lady, are the Tree.

The angels tremble in their choir,  
grow pale, and separate:  
never were longing and desire  
so vague and yet so great.  
Something perhaps is going to be  
that you perceived in dream.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

Hail to you! for my soul can see  
that you are ripe and teem.  
You lofty gate, that any day  
may open for our good:  
you ear my longing songs assay,  
my word—I know now—lost its way  
in you as in a wood.

And thus your last dream was designed  
to be fulfilled by me.

God looked at me: he made me blind .

You, Lady, are the Tree.

THE SPECTATOR

I WATCH the storms in the trees above:  
after days of mild decaying  
my windows shrink from their assaying,  
and the things I hear the distance saying,  
without a friend I find dismaying,  
without a sister cannot love.

There goes the storm to urge and alter,  
through forest trees and through time's tree;  
and nothing seems to age or falter:  
the landscape, like an open psalter,  
speaks gravely of eternity.

How small the strife that occupied us,  
how great is all that strives with us!  
We might, if, like the things outside us,  
we let the great storm over-ride us,  
grow spacious and anonymous.

We conquer littleness, obtaining  
success that only makes us small,  
while, unconstrained and unconstraining,  
the permanent eludes us all:  
that angel who, though loath, yet lingers  
to wrestle with mortality,  
and, when opponents' sinews settle  
in strife and stretch themselves to metal,  
can feel them move beneath his fingers  
like strings in some deep melody.

The challenger who failed to stand  
that trial so constantly rejected  
goes forth upright and resurrected  
and great from that hard, forming hand

RAINER MARIA RILKE

that clasped about him and completed.  
Conquests no longer fascinate.  
He triumphs now in being defeated  
by the unconquerably great.

NEW POEMS: FIRST PART





## JOSHUA'S COUNCIL

As an outflowing river breaks its tether,  
Apouring in pomp of waters from afar,  
so broke upon the elders met together  
for the last time the voice of Joshua.

How those who had been laughing were discounted,  
how hearts and hands were checked by every man,  
as though the din of thirty battles mounted  
within one mouth, and that one mouth began.

And once again the thousands were astounded  
as on the great day before Jericho,  
though now it was in him the trumpets sounded  
and their own lives the walls that tottered so

that not till rolling in the pangs of fear,  
defencelessly, they seemed to understand  
that this was he who, born to domineer,  
had shouted to the sun in Gideon: Stand!

And God had gone off in humiliation,  
and held the sun, until his hands were tired,  
above that immolating generation,  
only because one man had so desired.

And this was he—whose blood, though they had ceased  
to care about him in their calculations,  
his five score years and ten had not decreased.  
He rose and broke upon their habitations.

Like hail on standing harvests he descended.  
What would ye promise God? On every side  
uncounted gods await what ye decide.  
Choose, and be crushed by Him ye have offended.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

And then, with arrogance till then unspoken:  
I and my house have been and are his bride.

Whereat they all cried: Help us, give some token,  
that this hard choice may not bring punishment.

But they saw him, silent, without pity,  
reascending to his mountain city;  
then no more. It was the last descent.

THE DEPARTURE OF THE  
PRODIGAL SON

**N**ow to depart from all those hopes and fears  
 that we call ours, but which are not our own,  
 giving, like water in the ancient weirs,  
 a troubled image by the breezes blown;  
 from all that in our progress through the years  
 has clung to us like brambles—to depart,  
 and, with a start,  
 to notice things that one had failed to see  
 (familiarized through long habituation):  
 and then, with tender reconciliation,  
 close, at the very source, surmisingly,  
 to comprehend the whelming desolation,  
 the inexorable impersonality,  
 of all that grief the child had to withstand:  
 and then still to depart, hand out of hand,  
 as though you tore a wound that had been healing,  
 and to depart: whither? To unrevealing  
 distance, to some warm, unrelated land,  
 that, back-clothwise, will stay, without all feeling,  
 behind all action: garden, sea or sand;  
 and to depart: why? Impulse, generation,  
 impatience, obscure hope, and desperation  
 not to be understood or understand:  
 To take all this upon you, and in strife  
 to lose, perhaps, all that you had, to die  
 alone and destitute, not knowing why—

Is this the entrance into some new life?

THE OLIVE GARDEN

AND still he climbed, and through the gray leaves thrust,  
A quite gray and lost in the gray olive lands,  
and laid his burning forehead full of dust  
deep in the dustiness of burning hands.

After all, this. And this, then, was the end.  
And I must go now, blinder than before.  
Oh, wherefore wilt thou have me still contend  
Thou art, when I myself find thee no more.

No more I find thee. In myself no tone  
of thee; nor in the rest; nor in this stone.  
I can find thee no more. I am alone.

I am alone with all men sorrow name,  
which to relieve through thee was still my claim,  
thee whom I cannot find. O nameless shame . . .

Later, so men relate, an angel came.—

Wherefore an angel? Oh, there came the night,  
and turned the leaves of trees indifferently,  
and the disciples stirred uneasily.  
Wherefore an angel? Oh, there came the night.

The night that came requires no specifying;  
just so a hundred nights go by,  
while dogs are sleeping and while stones are lying—  
just any melancholy night that, sighing,  
lingers till morning mount the sky.

For angels never come to such men's prayers,  
nor nights for them mix glory with their gloom.  
Forsakenness is the self-loser's doom,  
and such are absent from their father's cares  
and disincluded from their mother's womb.

SONG OF WOMEN TO THE POET

EVERYTHING's now unfolding: so are we,  
E for we are nothing but such happiness.  
And what in brutes was blood and darkness, sec,  
that grew in us to soul, and in distress

cries for a further change. And cries for you.  
But you regard it with the tranquil look  
of some detached spectator of a view.  
And therefore we suppose that we mistook

the thing it cried for. Yet are not you he  
in whom, if we were lost, we might be near it?  
And where else could we more intensely be?

With us the Infinite keeps passing by.  
You must be there, you mouth, that we may hear it;  
you us-interpreter, for you we cry.

THE POET'S DEATH

HE lies. His pillowed features now appear  
pale and denying above the silent cover,  
since the whole world and all this knowledge of her,  
torn from the senses of her lover,  
fell back again to the unfeeling year.

Those who had seen him living saw no trace  
of his deep unity with all that passes,  
for these: these shadowy hills and waving grasses  
and streams of running water were his face.

Oh yes, his face was this remotest distance,  
that seeks him still and woos him in despair;  
and his mere mask, timidly dying there,  
tender and open, has no more consistence  
than coreless fruit corrupting in the air.

BUDDHA

As though he listened. Stillness: something far  
We hold our breath, but it has ceased to be.  
And he is star. And great star on great star  
stands round about him, though we cannot see.

Oh, he is all. Linger, have we the least  
hope that he'll notice? Could he ever need?  
And if we fell before him here to plead,  
he'd still sit deep and idle as a beast.

For that in him which drags us to his feet  
has circled in him for a million years.  
He who forgets our hopes and fears  
in thoughts from which our thoughts retreat.

L'ANGE DU MÉRIDIDIEN

CHARTRES

**I**N storm, that round the strong cathedral rages  
like a denier thinking through and through,  
your tender smiling suddenly engages  
our hearts and lifts them up to you:

O smiling angel, sympathetic stone,  
with mouth as from a hundred mouths distilled:  
do you not mark how, from your ever-filled  
sundial, our hours are gliding one by one—

that so impartial sundial, upon which  
the day's whole sum is balanced equally,  
as though all hours alike were ripe and rich?

What do you know, stone-nurtured, of our plight?  
With face that's even blissfuller, maybe,  
you hold your tables out into the night.



## THE CATHEDRAL

**I**N those small towns, where clustered round about  
Old houses squat and jostle like a fair  
that has just noticed it, and then and there  
shut up its stalls, and, silenced every shout,

the quacks all quiet, the drum-sticks all suspended,  
stands gaving up at it with straining cars:  
while it, as calm as ever, in the splendid  
wrinkled buttress-mantle rears  
itself above the homes it never knew:

in those small towns you come to realize  
how the cathedrals utterly outgrew  
their whole environment. Their birth and rise,  
as our own life's too great proximity  
will mount beyond our vision and our sense  
of other happenings, took precedence  
of all things; as though that were history,  
piled up in their immeasurable masses  
in petrification safe from circumstance,  
not that, which down among the dark streets passes  
and takes whatever name is given by chance  
and goes in that, as children green or red,  
or what the dealer has, wear in rotation.  
For birth was here, within this deep foundation,  
and strength and purpose in this aspiration,  
and love, like bread and wine, was everywhere,  
and the porch full of lovers' lamentation.  
Life trembled in the tintinnabulation,  
and the tall towers, full of resignation,  
climbed suddenly no more, for death was there.

GOD IN THE MIDDLE AGES

AND they had saved him up as their reward,  
And intended him to reign for ever,  
and hung upon him (as a last endeavour  
to prevent his journey heavenward

and to hold him near them in their slumbers)  
their ponderous cathedrals. Like a clock  
over his innumerable numbers  
he should circle for all time, and rock

to and fro to mark what they enacted.  
But he suddenly got into gear,  
and the people of the startled town

left him—for his voice inspired such fear—  
running with his striking-works extracted,  
and absconded from his dial's frown.

THE PANTHER

JARDIN DES PLANTES, PARIS

**H**is glance, so tired from traversing his cage's  
repeated railings, can hold nothing more.  
He feels as though there were a thousand cages,  
and no more world thereafter than before.

The padding of the strong and supple paces,  
within the tiniest circle circumscribed,  
is like a dance of force about a basis  
on which a mighty will stands stupefied.

And only now and then a noiseless lifting  
of the eye's curtain, till an image dart,  
go through the limbs' intensive silence drifting—  
and cease for ever in the heart.

THE UNICORN

AND then the saint looked up, and in surprise  
the prayer fell like a helmet from his head:  
for softly neared that never-credited  
white creature, which, like some unparented,  
some helpless hind, beseeches with its eyes.

The ivory framework of the limbs so light  
swayed like a balance delicately deflected,  
there glided through the coat a gleam of white,  
and on the forehead, where the beams collected,  
stood, like a moon-lit tower, the horn so bright,  
at every footstep proudly re-erected.

Its mouth was slightly open, and a trace  
of white through the soft down of gray and rose  
(whitest of whites) came from the gleaming teeth.

Its nostrils snuffed the air and sought repose.  
Its gaze, though, checked by nothing here beneath,  
projecting pictures into space,  
brought a blue saga-cycle to a close.

THE DONOR

THE painters' guild completed their commission.  
Perhaps the Saviour never blessed his zeal;  
perhaps no bishop honoured his submission  
as in this picture, granted him remission,  
and touched him lightly with the seal.

Perhaps that was the whole point: so to kneel  
(just as it's all that we have ever known):  
to kneel: and hold with choking breath one's own  
contracted contours, trying to expand,  
tight in one's heart like horses in one's hand.

So that, if something awesome should appear,  
something unpromised and unprophesied,  
we might dare hope it would not see nor hear,  
and might approach, until it came quite near,  
deep in itself and self-preoccupied.

THE ANGEL

BOWING his head a little, he absolves  
himself from things that limit and direct,  
for through his heart moves, mightily erect,  
the eternal future, that revolves.

Before him full of shapes deep heaven stands,  
and each can cry to him: "Look, look," and plead.  
Put nothing in his light unfettered hands  
from all that burdens yours. Unless indeed

those hands should come by night to prize and rate you,  
and fill your house with fury and with storm,  
and grasp at you as they would new-create you,  
and strike at you and break you from your form.

DEATH EXPERIENCED

WE cannot understand it, this going hence  
that will not answer anything we ask.  
Our wonder, love, or hate are all pretence  
so far as death goes, whose distorting mask

of tragical lament is all one sees.  
The world's still full of parts that we are playing;  
and while we try to please with what we're saying,  
death plays as well, although he does not please.

Yet when you went, there broke upon this scene  
a streak of something real and understood  
in through the crack you disappeared through: green  
of real green, real sunshine, real wood.

And we play on. What's learnt with blood and tears  
repeating, making gestures now and then;  
but your existence and your tale of years,  
removed now from our sight and from our ken,

sometimes descend on us like intimations  
of that reality and of its laws,  
and we transcend awhile our limitations  
and play life without thinking of applause.

BEFORE SUMMER RAIN

Q UITE suddenly, from all the green around,  
something—you hardly know just what—has gone;  
you feel the park itself drawing in upon  
the windows and growing silent. The last sound

is the rain-piping dotterel in the wood,  
reminding you of somebody's *Jerome*—  
there rises so much zeal and solitude  
from that one voice the downpour soon will come

responding to. The lofty walls, arrayed  
with ancient portraits, as though recollecting  
they should not listen to our talk, withdraw.

The faded tapestries are now reflecting  
the uncertain light we in our childhood saw  
those afternoons when we were so afraid.



LAST EVENING

BY PERMISSION OF FRAU NONNA

AND night and distant travel; for the train  
A of the whole army swept along the park.  
He looked up from the harpsichord again  
and played and glanced at her without remark,

almost like looking in a mirror's round:  
so filled with his young features was that face,  
features that bore his sadness with a grace  
suing more seductively at every sound.

Then all at once that seemed to disappear:  
she stood, as though with a great effort, near  
the window-seat, and clasped her beating breast.

His playing stopped. Outside a fresh wind blew.  
And on the mirror-table, strange and new,  
stood the black shako with the death's head crest.

THE ENSIGN

THE others feel in all they are arrayed  
no touch of sympathy: iron, cloth and leather.  
True they are sometimes flattered by a feather,  
but each is lone and loveless altogether;  
he carries though—as if it were a maid—  
the precious ensign in her gala dress.  
Sometimes he feels her heavy silk's caress  
flowing along his fingers fold on fold.

Shutting his eyes, he only can behold  
a smile, a smile; never must he forsake her.

And if a flashing of cuirasses shake her  
and grasp at her and strive and try to take her:—

then he may tear her boldly from the lance,  
as though he tore her from her virgin name,  
to hold beneath his tunic in a trance.

The others call it bravery and fame.

## TOMBS OF THE HETÆRÆ

**T**HEY lie in their long hair, and their brown faces  
 have now withdrawn deep, deep into themselves.  
 Eyes closed, as though confronting too much distance.  
 Skeletons, mouths, and flowers. Within the mouths  
 the smooth teeth like a set of pocket-chessmen  
 marshalled together in two ivory rows.  
 And flowers, yellow pearls, and slender bones,  
 and hands, and tunics—withering warp and woof  
 above the inward-fallen heart. But there,  
 beneath those rings, beneath the talismans  
 and eye-blue stones (those cherished souvenirs),  
 there still remains the silent crypt of sex,  
 filled to its vaulted roof with flower petals.  
 And once more yellow pearls, rolled far asunder,—  
 dishes of hard-burnt clay, whose rondure once  
 her image decorated,—green remains  
 of unguent vases that once smelt like flowers,—  
 figures of little gods, too: household altars,  
 Hetærae-heavens with ecstatic gods!  
 The unsprung girdle, the flat scarabæus,  
 and little figures of gigantic sex;  
 a mouth that laughs, and dancing girls, and runners,  
 and golden clasps that might be little bows  
 for hunting beast and bird-shaped amulets;  
 and long pins, quaintly fashioned crockery,  
 and a round potsherd with a reddish ground  
 whereon, like dark inscriptions over entries,  
 appear the taut legs of a team of horses.  
 And flowers again, pearls that have rolled apart,  
 the shining loins of a tiny lyre,  
 and then, between the veils that fall like vapours,  
 crept, as it were, from chrysalidal shoe,  
 the ankle, like an airy butterfly.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

And thus they lie, filled to the brim with things,  
with precious things, with jewels, toys, bric-à-brac,  
with broken trash (all that fell into them),  
and sombre as the bottom of a river.

Yes, they were river beds:  
over and over them in short, swift waves  
(all pressing onwards to some life that waited)  
bodies of many youths would hurtle headlong,  
and manly rivers, too, would roar within them.  
And sometimes boys, emerging from the mountains  
of Childhood, would descend in timid torrents,  
and play with what they found upon the bottom,  
till all at once the falling gradient gripped them:  
and then they'd fill with shallow crystal water  
the whole expanse of these broad watercourses,  
and set up eddies in the deeper places;  
and mirror, for the first time, the wide-spreading  
banks and far cries of birds, while, high above them,  
the starry nights of a sweet country blossomed  
into a heaven that could nowhere close.

ORPHEUS. EURYDICE. HERMES

THAT was the strange unfathomed mine of souls.  
And they, like silent veins of silver ore,  
were winding through its darkness. Between roots  
welled up the blood that flows on to mankind,  
like blocks of heavy porphyry in the darkness.  
Else there was nothing red.

But there were rocks  
and shadowy forests. Bridges over nothing,  
and that immense, grey, unreflecting pond  
that hung above its so far distant bed  
like a grey rainy sky above a landscape.  
And between meadows, soft and full of patience,  
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway  
like a long line of linen laid to bleach.

And on this single pathway they approached.

The slender husband first, in his blue mantle,  
gazing in dumb impatience straight before him.  
His steps devoured the way in mighty chunks  
they did not pause to chew; his hands were hanging,  
heavy and clenched, out of the falling folds,  
no longer conscious of the lightsome lyre,  
the lyre which had grown into his left  
like twines of rose into a branch of olive.  
It seemed as though his senses were divided:  
for, while his sight ran like a dog before him,  
turned round, came back, and stood, time and again,  
distant and waiting, at the path's next turn,  
his hearing lagged behind him like a smell.  
It seemed to him at times as though it stretched  
back to the progress of those other two  
who should be following up this whole ascent.

Then once more there was nothing else behind him  
but his climb's echo and his mantle's wind.

But he still told himself that they were coming;  
said it aloud and heard it die away.

Yes, they were coming, only they were two  
that trod with fearful lightness. If he durst  
but once look back (if only looking back  
were not undoing of this while enterprise  
still to be done), he could not fail to see them,  
the two light-footers following him in silence:  
the god of faring and of distant message,  
the travelling-hood over his shining eyes,  
the slender wand held out before his body,  
the wings around his ankles lightly beating,  
and in his left hand, as entrusted, *her*.

She, so belov'd, that from a single lyre  
more mourning rose than from all women-mourners,-  
that a whole world of mourning rose, wherein  
all things were once more present: wood and vale  
and road and hamlet, field and stream and beast,—  
and that around this world of mourning turned,  
even as around the other earth, a sun  
and a whole silent heaven full of stars,  
a heaven of mourning with disfigured stars:—  
she, so beloved.

But hand in hand now with that god she walked,  
her steps encircled by the clinging grave-clothes,  
uncertain, gentle, and without impatience.  
Wrapt in herself, like one whose time is near,  
she thought not of the husband going before them,  
nor of the road ascending into life.  
Wrapt in herself she wandered. And her deadness  
was filling her like fullness.

Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness  
was she with her great death, which was so new  
that for the time she could take nothing in.

NEW POEMS: FIRST PART

She had attained a new virginity  
and was intangible; her sex had closed  
like a young flower at the approach of evening,  
and her pale hands had grown so disaccustomed  
to being a wife, that even the slim god's  
endlessly gentle contact as he led her  
repelled her like a too great intimacy.

Even now she was no longer that fair woman  
who'd sometimes echoed in the poet's poems,  
no longer the broad couch's scent and island,  
and yonder husband's property no longer.

She was already loosened like long hair,  
and given far and wide like fallen rain,  
and dealt out like a manifold supply.

She was mere root.  
And when, abruptly swift,  
the god laid hold of her, and, with an anguished  
cry, uttered the words: He has turned round!—  
she took in nothing, and said softly: Who?

But in the distance, dark in the bright exit,  
someone or other stood, whose countenance  
was indistinguishable. Stood and saw  
how, on a strip of pathway between meadows,  
with sorrow in his look, the god of message  
silently turned to follow one already  
going back again along that self-same pathway,  
her steps encircled by the clinging grave-clothes,  
uncertain, gentle, and without impatience.

# ALCESTIS

THEN all at once the Messenger was there,  
 flung in among them like a new ingredient  
 just as the wedding feast was boiling over.  
 The revellers, they did not feel the god's  
 secret incoming, for he clasped his godhead  
 as closely to himself as a wet mantle,  
 and seemed like one of them, one or another,  
 as he passed through the hall. But suddenly  
 one of the guests, talking away there, saw  
 the hall's young master at the upper table  
 snatched, as it were, aloft, no more reclining,  
 and everywhere and with his whole existence  
 mirroring some strange and terrible demand.

And thereupon, as though the mixture cleared,  
 was silence: with some dregs, right at the bottom,  
 of cloudy hubbub, and a sediment  
 of falling babble, giving off already  
 the smell of hollow laughter that's gone flat.  
 And then they recognized the slender god,  
 and, as he stood there, full of inward mission  
 and pitiless, they almost knew for what.  
 And yet, when it was uttered, it was far  
 beyond all knowledge, past all comprehension.  
 Admetus dies. When? In this very hour.

He, though, had started breaking, piece by piece,  
 his shell of fright, and was already stretching  
 his hands therefrom to bargain with the god.  
 For years, for yet one single year of youth,  
 for months, for weeks, for a few days—alas!  
 not days,—for nights, just for a single one,  
 for one night, just for this one; just for this.  
 The god refused, and then he screamed aloud



NEW POEMS: FIRST PART

and screamed it out, withheld it out, and screamed  
as his own mother screamed when he was born.

And she came up to him, an aged woman,  
and then his father came, his aged father,  
and both stood, aged, antiquated, helpless,  
beside the screamer, who suddenly, never yet  
so closely, looked at them, stopped, gulped, and said:  
Father,  
does it mean much to you, this residue,  
this sediment, that hinders you in swallowing?  
Go, pour it out. And you, old woman, you,  
Mother,  
why are you here still? You have given birth.  
And held them both, like sacrificial beasts,  
in one hard grip. Then suddenly let go,  
pushed the old folk away, radiant, inspired,  
and breathing hard, and shouting: Creon, Creon!  
and nothing else, and nothing but that name.  
But in his face appeared that something else  
he did not utter, longing for the moment  
when, glowingly, across the tangled table,  
he'd proffer it the young friend, the beloved.  
Look, the old folk (appeared there) are no ransom,  
they are worn out and poor and almost worthless,  
but you—it's different, you in all your beauty—

But now he could no longer see his friend.  
He stayed behind, and it was she that came,  
almost a little smaller than he'd known her,  
and light and sad in her pale bridal dress.  
The others are all nothing but her street,  
down which she comes and comes (she'll soon be there  
within his arms, so painfully extended.)  
But while he waits, she speaks, though not to him.  
Speaks to the god, and the god listens to her,  
and all hear, as it were, within the god:

None can be substitute for him. I'm that.  
 I'm substitute. For no one's reached the end  
 of everything as I have. What remains  
 of all I used to be ? What's this but dying ?  
 Did she not tell you, she who sent you hither,  
 that yonder couch waiting in there for me  
 belongs to the underworld ? I said farewell.  
 Farewell upon farewell.  
 None dying could say more. And why I went,  
 was that all this, buried beneath the man  
 who's now my husband, might dissolve and fade.  
 Lead me away : I'm dying for him already.

And, like a veering wind on the high seas,  
 the god approached her almost as one dead,  
 and all at once was far off from her husband,  
 to whom, concealed within a little token,  
 he tossed the hundred lives of mortal men.  
 He stumbled dizzily towards the pair  
 and grasped at them as in a dream. Already  
 they'd nearly reached the entrance, where the women  
 were crowding tearfully. But yet once more  
 he saw the maiden's face, that turned to him,  
 smiling a smile as radiant as a hope,  
 that was almost a promise : to return,  
 grown up, out of the depths of death again,  
 to him, the liver—

Thereupon he flung  
 his hands, as he knelt there, before his face,  
 so as to see no more after that smile.

BIRTH OF VENUS

THE morning following that fearful night  
that passed with shouting, restlessness, and uproar,  
the sea burst open yet again and screamed.  
And, as the scream ebbed slowly to its close,  
and, from the sky's pale daybreak and beginning,  
was falling back to the dumb fishes' darkness—  
the sea gave birth.

The first rays shimmered on the foaming hair  
of the wide wave-vagina, on whose rim  
the maiden rose, white and confused and wet.  
And, as a young green leaf bestirs itself,  
stretches, and what was curled-up slowly opens,  
her body was unfolded into coolness  
and into the unfingered wind of dawn.

Like moons the knees went climbing clearly upwards  
to dive into the cloud-brims of the thighs;  
the narrow shadow of the calves retreated,  
the feet extended and grew luminous,  
and all the joints became as much alive  
as drinkers' throats.

And in the pelvis-chalice lay the belly,  
like a young fruit within a childish hand.  
And there, within it's navel's narrow goblet,  
was all this lucid life contained of darkness.  
Thereunder lightly rose the little swell  
and lapped continually towards the loins  
where now and then a silent trickle glistened.  
Translucent, though, and still without a shadow,  
lay, like a group of silver birch in April,  
warm, empty, all unhidden, the vagina.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

And now the shoulders' mobile balance hung  
in equipoise upon the wand-straight body,  
which mounted from the pelvis like a fountain,  
and in the long arms lingeringly descended,  
and swiftilier in the hair's abundant fall.

Then, very slowly came the face's progress,  
from the fore-shortened dimness of its drooping  
into clear horizontal exaltation,  
brought to abrupt conclusion by the chin.

Now, when the neck was stretched out like a sunbeam  
and like a flower-stalk where sap is mounting,  
the arms began to stretch out too, like necks  
of swans, when they are making for the shore.

Then entered the dim dawning of this body,  
like matutinal wind, the first deep breath.  
Within the tenderest branches of the vein-trees  
a whispering arose, and then the blood  
began to rustle over deeper places.  
And this wind grew and grew, until it hurtled  
with all its power of breath at the new breasts  
and filled them up and forced itself within them,  
and they, like filled sails full of the horizon,  
impelled the lightsome maiden to the shore.

And thus the goddess landed.

And behind her,  
who swiftly left behind the youthful shores,  
kept springing up throughout the whole forenoon  
the flowers and the grasses, warm, confused,  
as from embracing. And she walked and ran.

But after noon, during the heaviest hour,  
the sea rose up yet once again and flung  
a dolphin out upon that self-same spot.  
Dead, red, and open.

THE BOWL OF ROSES

YOU'VE seen the flare of anger, seen two boys  
bunch themselves up into a ball of something  
that was mere hate and roll upon the ground  
like a dumb animal attacked by bees;  
actors, sky-towering exaggerators,  
the crashing downfall of careering horses,  
casting away their sight, flashing their teeth  
as though the skull were peeling from the mouth.

But now you know how such things are forgotten;  
for now before you stands the bowl of roses,  
the unforgettable, entirely filled  
with that extremity of being and bending,  
promise beyond all power of paying, presence,  
that might be ours: that might be our extreme.

Living in silence, endless opening out,  
space being used, but without space being taken  
from that space which the things around diminish;  
absence of outline, like untinted groundwork  
and mere Within; much that is strangely tender  
and self-illuminating to the brim:  
where have we ever known the like of this?  
And this, too: that a feeling should arise  
through petals being touched by other petals?

And this: a something opening like an eyelid,  
and lying there beneath it countless eyelids,  
all of them closed, as though they had to slumber  
ten-fold to quench some inward power of sight.  
And this, above all: that through all these petals  
light has to penetrate. From thousand heavens  
they slowly filter out that drop of darkness  
within whose fiery glow the mazy bundle  
of stamens stirs itself and reaches upwards.

And then the movement in the roses, look:  
 gestures deflected through such tiny angles,  
 they'd all remain invisible unless  
 their rays ran streaming out into the cosmos.

That white one, look, that blissfully unfolded  
 and stands there in the great big open petals  
 like Venus upright in her mussel shell;  
 look how that blushing one, as though confused,  
 has turned towards a cooler, and how she,  
 the cooler, is unfeelingly withdrawing;  
 and how the cold one stands, wrapped in herself,  
 among those open roses doffing all.  
 And *what* they doff—the way it can appear  
 now light, now heavy—like a cloak, a burden,  
 a wing, a domino—it all depends—  
 and *how* they doff it: as before the loved one.

What can they *not* be: was that yellow one  
 that lies there hollow, open, not the rind  
 upon a fruit, in which that self-same yellow  
 was the intenser, orange-ruddier juice?  
 And did her blowing prove too much for this one,  
 since, touched by air, her nameless rosiness  
 assumed the bitter after-taste of lilac?  
 And is not yonder cambric one a dress,  
 wherein, still soft and breath-warm, clings the vest  
 flung off along with it among the shadows  
 of early morning by the woodland pool?  
 And what's this opalescent porcelain,  
 so fragile, but a shallow china cup,  
 and full of little shining butterflies?  
 And that, containing nothing but herself?

And are not all just that, just self-containing,  
 if self-containing means, to take the world  
 and wind and rain and patience of the spring-time

NEW POEMS: FIRST PART

and guilt and restlessness and muffled fate  
and sombreness of evening earth and even  
the melting, fleeing, forming of the clouds  
and the vague influence of distant stars,  
and change it to a handful of Within ?

It now lies heedless in those open roses.





## NEW POEMS: SECOND PART

ARCHAIC TORSO OF 'APOLLO

**A**LTHOUGH we never knew his lyric head  
from which the eyes looked out so piercing clear,  
his torso glows still like a chandelier  
in which his gaze, only turned down, not dead,

persists and burns. If not, how could the surge  
of the breast blind you, or in the gentle turning  
of the thighs a smile keep passing and returning  
towards that centre where the seeds converge?

If not, this stone would stand all uncompact  
beneath the shoulders' shining cataract,  
and would not glisten with that wild beast grace,

and would not burst from every rift as rife  
as sky with stars: for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.

THE DEATH OF THE BELOVED

HE only knew of death what all men may:  
that those it takes it thrusts into dumb night.  
When she herself, though,—no, not snatched away,  
but tenderly unloosened from his sight,

had glided over to the unknown shades,  
and when he felt that he had now resigned  
the moonlight of her laughter to their glades,  
and all her ways of being kind:

then all at once he came to understand  
the dead through her, and joined them in their walk,  
kin to them all; he let the others talk,

and paid no heed to them, and called that land  
the fortunately-placed, the ever-sweet.—  
And groped out all its pathways for her feet.

A SIBYL

**Y**EARS and years ago they'd called her old.  
But still she went on living there, and passed  
along the same street day by day. At last  
they told her, as a forest's years are told,

by centuries. But still she'd stand about  
each evening on the spot they knew so well,  
gloomy and black as an old citadel,  
high and hollow and burnt-out;

for ever circled by a screaming flight  
of words, that, all unwatched for and unwilled,  
had lodged within her breast and propagated,

while those already home again, fulfilled,  
under her eyebrows congregated,  
sat darkly waiting for the night.

ESTHER

THE chamber women combed for seven days  
 the ashes of her grief and her dismay's  
 lees and precipitation from her hair,  
 and carried it and sunned it like a fleece  
 and fed it with the purest spiceries  
 for two days longer: then all unaware

the hour had come when, no command obeying,  
 unlooked for, like a ghost from graveyard straying,  
 she crossed the threshold of that house of fear,  
 and, leaning on her women, through the dim  
 yet shining distance of its halls, saw him  
 by whom men die when they draw near.

He shone so that she felt the jewels flaring,  
 the royal rubies given her to wear;  
 she filled herself so swiftly with his bearing  
 that, like a vessel with no room to spare,

she overflowed already with his might  
 before she had half traversed the third hall,  
 which poured the bright green malachite of its wall  
 all over her. She had not guessed aright  
 that length of way, and all those stones and rings  
 grown heavier from this shining of the king's,  
 cold from her fear. Yet walked unfaltering.

But when she felt the shining shafts combine  
 and centre on the throne of tourmaline,  
 and saw him towering, real as a thing:

one of her women, seeing the swoon begin,  
 caught her and raised her to the throne and left her.  
 He touched her lightly with his pointed sceptre,  
 and she perceived it without sense, within.

THE EGYPTIAN MARY

SINCE that time when, bed-hot, as the whore,  
She crossed the Jordan, and beyond its brink,  
grave-like, gave Eternity the store  
of all her undiluted heart to drink,

her earlier self-prodigality  
had grown to such entire unselfawareness,  
that at last, like the eternal bareness  
of all things, all time-yellowed ivory,

she lay there in her brittle hair's persistence.  
And a lion circled, and there sought her  
one grown old who called for his assistance:

(and they dug in unison.)

And the ancient laid her there alone.  
And the lion, like a shield-supporter,  
sat near by and held the stone.

THE RESURRECTION

**H**E had never brought himself as yet  
to forbid and chide those subtle tones  
that betrayed her love as self-admired;  
and she sank before the cross attired  
in a sorrow that was all beset  
with her love's most precious stones.

When she came, though, on her ministration,  
to the sepulchre in bitter woe,  
he had risen, just for her salvation,  
saying with final benediction: No—

Later, in her cave, she recollected,  
and perceived how, strengthened by his death,  
oil's relief he had at last rejected  
and presentiment of touch and breath,

that from her he might create the lover  
whom a loved one can no longer bind,  
since, upswept by forces far above her,  
she has left his voice so far behind.

FROM THE LIFE OF A SAINT

HE knew of terrors that encompassed one  
Hswiftly and unsurvivably as death.  
His heart toiled slowly through with labouring breath,  
the heart he nurtured like a son.

Ineffable extremities he knew,  
changeless as dungeons hidden from the sky;  
obediently he gave his soul up too,  
when she reached womanhood, that she might lie

beside her bridegroom and her lord; while he  
remained behind without her, in a place  
where loneliness surpassed reality,  
and shunned all speech and never showed his face.

But as some recompense, before the sands  
had quite run out, he knew the happiness  
of holding, when he yearned for tenderness,  
himself, like all creation, in his hands.



RAINER MARIA RILKE

SONG OF THE SEA

CAPRI, PICCOLA MARINA

PRIMEVAL breath from sea,  
sea-wind by night:  
from every errand free;  
one lying till light  
must seek and find what he  
may interpose:  
primeval breath from sea,  
that only blows  
as for primeval stone,  
pure space  
rushing from realms unknown.

How felt by a high-sown  
fig-tree that clings for place  
in the moonlight alone.

PIANO PRACTICE

THE summer hums. The hot noon stupefies.  
She breathed her fresh white dress distractedly,  
and laid into the cogent exercise  
impatience after some reality

might come to-morrow, or to-night---was there,  
perhaps, already, though they kept it dark;  
and all at once grew stunningly aware,  
through the tall windows, of the pampered park.

Stopped at that point ; gazed out, and, with a quick  
clasping of fingers, longed for a long book ;  
turned in a sudden fit of rage and shook  
the jasmin scent away. It made her sick.

THE STRANGER

Now as ever careless to unravel  
What might be the view his nearest took,  
once more he departed; lost, forsook.  
For he clung to them, these nights of travel,

closelier than to any lover's night.  
How he'd watched in slumberless delight  
out beneath the shining stars all yonder  
circumscribed horizons roll asunder,  
ever-changing like a changing fight;

others, with their moon-bright hamlets tendered  
like some booty they had seized, surrendered  
peacefully, or through tall trees would shed  
glimpses of far-stretching parks, containing  
grey ancestral houses that with craning  
head a moment he inhabited,  
knowing more deeply one could never bide;  
then, already round the next curve speeding,  
other highways, bridges, countries, leading  
on to cities darkness magnified.

And to let all this, without all craving,  
slip behind him meant beyond compare  
more to him than pleasure, goods, or fame.  
Though the well-steps in some foreign square,  
daily hollowed by the drawers there,  
seemed at times like something he could claim.

THE SOLITARY

**N**o, my heart shall turn into a tower,  
NI myself against its brim be pressed:  
there where nothing is from hour to hour  
but pain and world and something unexpressed.

Only, in the Incommensurable,  
one lone thing, now glooming, now a-glance,  
only one last, longing countenance  
thrust into the never-silenceable.

One extreme stone face, with steadfastness  
mirroring some inward equipoise;  
urged by that which silently destroys  
on to ever-greater happiness.

THE CHILD

THEY sit and watch it playing at their feet,  
T half-consciously; it seems to have the power,  
sometimes, that round, real face, clear and complete,  
to step out from the profile like an hour

that starts and goes on striking to an end.  
They let it strike away without misgiving,  
dulled with toil and indolent with living;  
though it's bearing, could they comprehend,

even now, with effort never-ending,  
everything, while in this wearisome  
waiting-room it sits by them, intending  
just to wait until its time has come.

# REQUIEM



## REQUIEM

### FOR A FRIEND

I HAVE my dead, and I would let them go  
and be surprised to see them all so cheerful,  
so soon at home in being-dead, so right,  
so unlike their repute. You, you alone,  
return; brush past me, move about, persist  
in knocking something that vibrantly  
betrays your presence. Don't take from me all  
I'm slowly learning. For I'm sure you're wrong,  
if you're disturbed into a home-sick longing  
for something here. We transmute it all;  
it's not here, we reflect it from ourselves,  
from our own being, as soon as we perceive it.

I thought you'd got much further. I'm perplexed  
that you, just you, should wander, who surpassed  
all other women here in transmutation.  
That we were frightened when you died, or, rather,  
that your strong death made a dark interruption,  
tearing the till-then from the ever-since:  
that is our business: to set that in order  
will be the work that everything provides us.  
But that you too were frightened, even now  
are frightened, now, when fright has lost its meaning,  
that you are losing some of your eternity,  
even a little, to step in here, friend, here,  
where nothing yet exists; that in the All,  
for the first time distracted and half-hearted,  
you did not grasp the infinite ascension  
as once you grasped each single thing on earth;  
that from the circulation that received you  
the gravitation of some mute unrest  
should drag you down to measurable time:  
this often wakes me like an entering thief.  
If I could say you merely deign to come



from magnanimity, from superabundance,  
 because you are so sure, so self-possessed,  
 that you can wander like a child, not frightened  
 of places where there're things that happen to one:  
 but no, you're asking. And that penetrates  
 right to the bone and rattles like a saw.  
 Reproach, such as you might bear as a spirit,  
 bear against me when I withdraw myself  
 at night into my lungs, into my bowels,  
 into the last poor chamber of my heart,  
 such a reproach would not be half so gruesome  
 as this mute asking. What is it you ask?

Say, shall I travel? Have you left somewhere  
 a thing behind you, that torments itself  
 with trying to reach you? Travel to a country  
 you never saw, although it was as closely  
 akin to you as one half of your senses?

I'll voyage on its rivers, set my foot  
 upon its soil and ask about old customs,  
 stand talking with the women in their doorways  
 and pay attention when they call their children.  
 I will observe how they take on the landscape  
 outside there in the course of the old labour  
 of field and meadow; will express a wish  
 to be presented to the king himself,  
 and work upon the priests with bribery  
 to leave me lying before the strongest statue  
 and then withdraw, shutting the temple doors.  
 But in conclusion, having learnt so much,  
 I'll simply watch the animals, that something  
 of their own way of turning may glide over  
 into my joints; I'll have a brief existence  
 within their eyes, that solemnly retain me  
 and slowly loose me, calmly, without judgment.  
 I'll make the gardeners repeat by heart  
 the names of many flowers and so bring back  
 in pots of lovely proper names a remnant,

## REQUIEM

a little remnant, of the hundred perfumes.  
And I will purchase fruits too, fruits, wherein  
that country, sky and all, will re-exist.

For that was what you understood: full fruits.  
You used to set them out in bowls before you  
and counterpoise their heaviness with colours.  
And women too appeared to you as fruits,  
and children too, both of them from within  
impelled into the forms of their existence.  
And finally you saw yourself as fruit,  
lifted yourself out of your clothes and carried  
that self before the mirror, let it in  
up to your gaze; which remained, large, in front,  
and did not say; that's me; no, but: this is.  
So unenquiring was your gaze at last,  
so unpossessive and so truly poor,  
it wanted even you no longer: holy.

That's how I would retain you, as you placed  
yourself within the mirror, deep within,  
and far from all else. Why come differently?  
Why thus revoke yourself? Why are you trying  
to make me feel that in those amber beads  
around your neck there was still something heavy  
with such a heaviness as never lurks  
in the beyond of tranquil pictures? Why  
does something in your bearing bode misfortune?  
What makes you read the contours of your body  
like lines upon a hand, and me no longer  
able to see them but as destiny?

Come to the candle-light. I'm not afraid  
to look upon the dead. When they return  
they have a right to hospitality  
within our gaze, the same as other things.

Come; we'll remain a little while in silence.  
Look at this rose, here, on my writing-desk:  
is not the light around it just as timid  
as that round you? It too should not be here.

It ought to have remained or passed away  
out in the garden there, unmixed with me,—  
it stays, unconscious of my consciousness.

Don't be afraid now if I comprehend:  
it's rising in me—oh, I must, I must,  
even if it kills me, I must comprehend.  
Comprehend, that you're here. I comprehend.  
Just as a blind man comprehends a thing,  
I feel your fate although I cannot name it.  
Let both of us lament that someone took you  
out of your mirror. If you still can cry?  
No, you can't cry. You long ago transformed  
the force and thrust of tears to your ripe gazing,  
and were in act of changing every kind  
of sap within you to a strong existence  
that mounts and circles in blind equipoise.  
Then, for the last time, chance got hold of you,  
and snatched you back out of your farthest progress,  
back to a world where saps will have their way.  
Did not snatch all, only a piece at first,  
but when reality, from day to day,  
so swelled around that piece that it grew heavy,  
you needed your whole self; then off you went  
and broke yourself in fragments from your law,  
laboriously, needing yourself. And then  
you took yourself away and from your heart's  
warm, night-warm; soil you dug the yet green seeds  
your death was going to spring from: your own death,  
the death appropriate to your own life.  
And then you ate those grains of your own death  
like any others, ate them one by one,  
and had within yourself an after-taste  
of unexpected sweetness, had sweet lips,  
you: in your senses sweet within already.

Let us lament, Do you know how unwilling  
and hesitatingly your blood returned,

## REQUIEM

recalled from an incomparable orbit ?  
With what confusion it took up again  
the tiny circulation of the body ?  
With what mistrust it entered the placenta,  
suddenly tired from the long homeward journey ?  
You drove it on again, you pushed it forward,  
you dragged it to the hearth, as people drag  
a herd of animals to sacrifice;  
and spite of all desired it to be happy.  
And finally you forced it: it was happy,  
and ran up and surrendered. You supposed,  
being so accustomed to the other measures,  
that this was only for a little while;  
but now you were in time, and time is long.  
And time goes by, and time goes on, and time  
is like relapsing after some long illness.

How very short your life, when you compare it  
with hours you used to sit in silence, bending  
the boundless forces of your boundless future  
out of their course to the new germination,  
that became fate once more. O painful labour.  
Labour beyond all strength. And you performed it  
day after day, you dragged yourself along to it  
and pulled the lovely woof out of the loom  
and wove your threads into another pattern.  
And still had spirit for a festival.

For when you'd done you looked for some reward,  
like children, when they've drunk a nasty drink  
of bitter-sweet tea that may make one better.  
You gave your own reward, being still so distant,  
even then, from all the rest; and no one there  
who could have hit on a reward to please you.  
You yourself knew it. You sat up in child-bed,  
a mirror there before you, that returned  
all that you gave. Now everything was you,  
and right in front; within was mere deceit,  
the sweet deceit of Everywoman, gladly

putting her jewels on and doing her hair.

And so you died like women long ago,  
died in the old warm house, old-fashionedly,  
the death of those in child-bed, who are trying  
to close themselves again but cannot do it,  
because that darkness which they also bore  
returns and grows importunate and enters.

Ought they not, though, to have gone and hunted up  
some mourners for you? Women who will weep  
for money, and, if paid sufficiently,  
will howl through a whole night when all is still.  
Observances! We haven't got enough.  
observances. All vanishes in talk.

That's why you have to come back, and with me  
retrieve omitted mourning. Can you hear me?  
I'd like to fling my voice out like a cloth  
over the broken fragments of your death  
and tug at it till it was all in tatters,  
and everything I said was forced to go  
clad in the rags of that torn voice and freeze—  
if mourning were enough. But I accuse:  
not him who thus withdrew you from yourself  
(I can't distinguish him, he's like them all),  
but in him I accuse all: accuse man.

If somewhere deep within me rises up  
a having-once-been-child I don't yet know,  
perhaps the purest childness of my childhood:  
I will not know it. Without looking at it  
or asking, I will make an angel of it,  
and hurl that angel to the foremost rank  
of crying angels that remembrance God.

For now too long this suffering has lasted,  
and none can stand it; it's too hard for us,  
this tortuous suffering caused by spurious love,  
which, building on prescription like a habit,  
calls itself just and battens on injustice.  
Where is the man who justly may possess?

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Who can possess what cannot hold itself  
but only now and then blissfully catches  
and flings itself on like a child a ball ?  
As little as the captain can retain  
the niké poised upon his vessel's prow  
when the mysterious lightness of her godhead  
has caught her up into the limpid sea-wind,  
can one of us call back to him the woman  
who, seeing us no longer, takes her way  
along some narrow strip of her existence,  
as through a miracle, without mischance—  
unless his calling and delight were guilt.

For this is guilt, if anything be guilt,  
not to enlarge the freedom of a love  
with all the freedom in one's own possession.  
All we can offer where we love is this:  
to loose each other; for to hold each other  
comes easy to us and requires no learning.

Are you still there ? Still hiding in some corner ?—  
You knew so much of all I have been saying,  
and could so much too, for you passed through life  
open to all things, like a breaking day.  
Women suffer: loving means being lonely,  
and artists feel at times within their work  
the need, where most they love, for transmutation.  
You began both; and both exist in *that*  
which fame, detaching it from you, disfigures.  
Oh, you were far beyond all fame. Were in-  
conspicuous; had gently taken in  
your beauty as we take in a gala flag  
on the grey morning of a working-day,  
and wanted nothing but a lengthy work,  
which is not done; in spite of all, not done.

If you're still there, if there is still some place  
within this darkness where your sensitive spirit's  
vibrating to and fro on shallow sound-waves

a lonely voice within a lonely night  
 starts in the air-stream of a lofty room:  
 hear me and help me. Look, without knowing when,  
 we keep on slipping backwards from our progress  
 into some unintended thing, and there  
 we get ourselves involved as in a dream,  
 and there at last we die without awakening.  
 No one's got any further. Anyone  
 who's pumped his blood up to some lengthy work  
 may find the pressure's fallen and his blood's  
 worthlessly following its own gravity.  
 For somewhere there's an old hostility  
 between our human life and greatest work.  
 May I see into it and it say: help me!

Do not return. If you can bear it, stay  
 dead with the dead. The dead are occupied.  
 But help me, as you may without distraction,  
 as the most distant sometimes helps: in me.

## REQUIEM

### FOR WOLF GRAF VON KALCKREUTH

CAN I have never seen you? For my heart  
feels you like some too-burdensome beginning  
one still defers. Oh, could I but begin  
to tell of you, dead that you are, you gladly,  
you passionately dead. And was it so  
alleviating as you supposed, or was  
no-more-alive still far from being-dead ?  
You thought you could possess things better there  
where none care for possessions. You supposed  
yonder you'd find yourself inside the landscape  
that here closed up before you like a picture,  
would come to the beloved from within  
and penetrate through all things, strong and wheeling.  
Oh, that you may not have too long had cause  
to tax your boyish error with deception,  
but, being dissolved within a stream of sadness,  
in ecstasy and only half-awareness,  
you may have found in motion round the stars  
the happiness that far away from here  
you placed within that being-dead you dreamt of.  
How near you were to it, dear friend, even here.  
How much it was at home here, what you purposed,  
the earnest joy of your so strenuous longing.  
When, tired of being happy and unhappy,  
you mined into yourself and painfully  
climbed with an insight, almost breaking down  
under the weight of dark discovery:  
you carried what you never recognized,  
you carried joy, you carried through your blood  
your little saviour's burden to the shore.

Why could you not have waited till the point  
where hardness grows unbearable: where it turns,  
being now so hard because so real ? Look,



this might perhaps have come with your next moment;  
that moment, maybe, was already trimming  
its garland at the door you slammed for ever.

Oh that percussion, how it penetrates,  
when somewhere, through impatience's sharp draught,  
something wide open shuts and locks itself!  
Who can deny on oath that in the earth  
a crack goes springing through the healthy seeds?  
Who has investigated if tame beasts  
are not convulsed with sudden lust for killing  
when that jerk shoots like lighting through their brains?  
Who can deduce the influence leaping out  
from actions to some near-by terminal?  
Who can conduct where everything's conductive?

The fact that you destroyed. That this must be  
related of you till the end of time.

Even if a hero's on his way, to tear  
opinion we mistake for face of things  
off like a mask, and furiously expose  
for the first time faces to us, whose mute eyes  
have long been gazing through dissembling holes:  
this fact will still be face and will not alter:  
that you destroyed. For blocks were lying there,  
and in the air already was the rhythm  
of some now scarce repressible construction.  
You walked around and did not see their order,  
one hid the other from you; each of them  
seemed to be rooted, when in passing by  
you strained yourself, lacking true confidence,  
to heave it up. You heaved them all, but only  
to sling them back into the gaping quarry  
wherein, being so distended by your heart,  
they would no longer fit. Had but a woman  
laid her light hand on the still mild beginning  
of this dark rage; had someone occupied,  
occupied in the inmost of his being,  
but quietly met you on your dumb departure

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to do this deed; had even something led you  
to take your journey past some wakeful workshop  
where men were hammering and day achieving  
simple reality; had there been room  
enough in your full gaze to let the image  
even of a toiling beetle find admittance:  
then, in a sudden flash of intuition,  
you would have read the script whose characters  
you'd slowly graved into yourself since childhood,  
trying from time to time whether a sentence  
might not be formed: alas, it seemed unmeaning.  
I know; I know: you lay in front and thumbed  
away the grooves, like someone feeling out  
the inscription on a grave-stone. Anything  
that yielded light you held up as a lamp  
before those letters, but the flame went out  
before you'd understood—your breath, perhaps,  
perhaps the trembling of your hand; perhaps  
just of its own accord, as flames will do.  
You never read it. And we do not dare  
to read through all the sorrow and the distance.

We only watch the poems that still climb,  
still cross, the inclination of your feeling,  
carrying the words that you had chosen. No,  
you did not choose all; often a beginning  
was given you in full, and you'd repeat it  
like some commission. And you thought it sad.  
Ah, would you had never heard it from yourself!  
Your angel's heard still, uttering the same  
text with a different accent, and rejoicing  
breaks out in me to hear his recitation,  
rejoicing over you: for this was yours:  
that from you every proffered love fell back,  
that you had recognized renunciation  
as price of seeing and in death your progress.  
This was what you possessed, you artist, these

three open moulds. Look, here is the casting from the first: space for your feeling; and look, there, from the second I'll strike out for you the gaze that desires nothing, the great artist's gaze; and in the third, which you yourself broke up too soon, and which as yet the first outrushing of quivering food from the white-heated heart had scarce had time to reach, a death was moulded, deepened by genuine labour, that own death which has such need of us because we live it, and which we're never nearer to than here.

All this was your possession and your friendship; as you yourself often surmised; but then the hollowness of those moulds frightened you, you groped within and drew up emptiness and mourned your lot. O ancient curse of poets! Being sorry for themselves instead of saying, for ever passing judgment on their feeling instead of shaping it; for ever thinking that what is sad or joyful in themselves is what they know and what in poems may fitly be mourned or celebrated. Invalids, using a language full of woefulness to tell us where it hurts, instead of sternly transforming into words those selves of theirs, as imperturbable cathedral carvers transposed themselves into the constant stone. That would have been salvation. Had you once perceived how fate may pass into a verse and not come back, how, once in, it turns image, nothing but image, but an ancestor, who sometimes, when you watch him in his frame, seems to be like you and again not like you:— you would have persevered.

But this is petty,  
thinking of what was not. And some appearance

## REQUIEM

of undeserved reproach in these comparings.  
Whatever happens has had such a start  
of our supposing that we never catch it,  
never experience what it really looked like.

Don't be ashamed, when the dead brush against you,  
those other dead, who held out to the end.  
(What, after all, does end mean ?) Exchange glances  
peacefully with them, as is customary,  
and have no fear of being conspicuous  
through carrying the burden of our grief.  
The big words from those ages when as yet  
happening was visible are not for us.  
Who talks of victory ? To endure is all.

FOR A BOY

WHAT names I printed in myself, till cow  
 dog, elephant and all the ark  
 might have been met and passed without remark,  
 and then the zebra,—why, oh why?  
 Who bears me now  
 mounts like a tidal mark  
 beyond all that. What peace can lie  
 in knowing that one existed in one's place,  
 but never pressed, where hard or soft withstands,  
 behind them to the comprehending face?

And these originating hands—

You sometimes said: He promises . . . a trace . . .  
 I promised, yes, but what I promised you  
 is not what overpowers.  
 Sometimes I'd crouch against the house for hours,  
 watching a skylark in the blue.  
 If only I could have been one with it, that gazing!  
 That carried, that lifted me, my brows with raising  
 were right up there. No one was dear to me;  
 affection was anguish,—then (oh see, if you can!)  
 I was not we  
 and was much bigger than a man,  
 I was the only risk I ran,  
 kernel of all anxiety.

A little kernel, I don't begrudge it, whether  
 to the streets or to the wind. I give it away.  
 For that we all sat so snugly there together  
 was a thing I never believed. Honour bright, I say.  
 You talked, you laughed, yet each one sitting by there  
 was not in the talking and not in the laughing. No.  
 In the way in which you trembled, trembled neither

## REQUIEM

the sugar-bowl nor glass filled to overflow.  
The apple lay. How sometimes it would cheer  
me to grasp the firm full apple with my hand,  
or the strong table where the still cups stand:  
the good cups, how they tranquillized the year.  
My toy, too, sometimes kept me company,  
behaved as other things did, hardly less  
dependably, though not so restfully.  
And thus in a perpetual wakefulness  
it stood midway between my hat and me.  
A wooden horse, a cock of painted clay,  
the doll whose leg was broken on a stone:  
I laboured for them day by day.  
I made the sky small when they looked that way;  
for that I felt quite early, how alone  
a wooden horse is. But to make the thing:  
a wooden horse of any size you showed.  
It's painted and then tugged at with a string,  
and gets the joltings of the real road.  
Why was it not a lie, when this was called  
a horse? Because one felt oneself a tiny  
bit of a horse, grew maney, shiny,  
sinewy, four-legged—(all, so that one might spring  
to a man at last)? But was there not a trace  
of wood in one as well, did not one try at  
growing hard for it on the quiet,  
and go about with a diminished face?  
I almost think we always changed our place.  
Whenever I saw the brook, how I would race,  
and if the brook raced too, away I bounded.  
When I saw someone ringing I resounded,  
and when it rang I was the cause of it.

I thrust into it all incessantly,  
though not in need of me was all I'd fly to,  
and only sadder for my company.

Now I am suddenly said good-bye to.  
 See,  
 is a new learning beginning, a new asking?  
 Or must I now be tasking  
 myself with telling of you?—That troubles me.  
 The house? I never rightly understood.  
 The rooms? I tried to notice all I could.  
 . . . You, Mother, do you know who really  
 the dog might be?  
 Even that we gathered berries in the wood  
 seems to me now a strange discovery.

There must be some dead children somewhere though,  
 to come and play with me. They're always dying.  
 The same as I did, after a long lying  
 still in a room and never getting well.  
 Well. How that sounds here. Does it still make sense?  
 Here, where I am,  
 no one is ill, I think.  
 Since my sore throat, which I almost forget—

Here everyone is like a poured-out drink.

*But those who drink us I've not seen as yet.*

## NOTES

## NOTES

(*G.W. Gesammelte Werke*)

## THE PICTURE BOOK

### P. 63. *The Knight.*

Written in July, 1899, at Schmargendorf, near Berlin.

### P. 64. *Girls.*

Written on September 10th, 1900, while Rilke was living alone in the artists' colony of Worpswede, near Bremen, after a party which had included the painter Paula Becker and the sculptress Clara Westhoff, his future wife. (*Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, 287 ff.)

### P. 65. *Music.*

Written on July 24th, 1899, at Schmargendorf. For many years Rilke regarded music with deep suspicion, as a temptation to dissipate energies that should be stored and concentrated, as a substitute for reality, as a form of what is now called 'escapism.' For example, on August 8th, 1903, he wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé of Rodin: *His art was from the very beginning realization (and the opposite of music, as that which transforms the apparent realities of the everyday world and unrealizes them still further into easy, gliding appearance. Which is the reason why this opposite of art, this non-compression, this temptation to self-discharge has so many friends and hearers and henchmen, so many who are unfree and tied to enjoyment, not intensified from within, and delighted from outside, themselves.)* (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 112). Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis has described how he was gradually converted by Beethoven and the Quartetto Triestino, who used to come over and play on the great terrace at Schloss Duino. (*Erinnerungen an R.M.R.*, 30-31.)

### P. 67. *Childhood.*

Written about the middle of 1902.



P. 68. *A Recollection of Childhood.*

An earlier version of this poem occurs in Rilke's Journal for March 21st, 1900. (*Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, 245-6.)

P. 69. *The Boy.*

Written in 1902. The factual basis of this vision is not, as has sometimes been supposed, militarism, but the fire-brigade.

P. 70. *The Last Supper.*

In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé from Sweden in July 1904, describing his journey northwards from Rome, Rilke wrote: *Milan: the Last Supper, beyond all measure glorious, painting, near only to ancient frescos, with all else incomparable; almost faded away, almost merely related by an invisible, deeply-agitated voice, and yet ineffably there, presence and in its essence indestructible.* (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 185.)

P. 71. *Pont du Carrousel.*

Written in 1902.

P. 74. *Autumn.*

Paris, September 11th, 1902.

P. 75. *Annunciation.*

Schmargendorf, July 21st, 1899.

P. 77. *The Spectator.*

Schmargendorf, January 1901. Describing their motor-drive from her castle of Lautschin in Bohemia to Weimar in August 1911, Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis writes: *Glorious the woods on the Saxon frontier—I shall never forget how Rilke during a rest under the tall oaks recited that wonderful poem about the struggle with the angel. He loved to recite his verses in surroundings worthy of them.* (*Erinnerungen an R.M.R.*, 23.)

## NEW POEMS

P. 87. *Buddha.*

In Rodin's garden at Meudon, on a little mound at the end of a gravel path, stood an image of Buddha, which Rilke

could see from his window. (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 262.) He often refers to it in his letters: e.g. January 11th, 1906: *And the Buddha is great and experienced, and one thinks the sap is mounting in him . . . behind, all the moonlight in the world surrounded the Buddha, like the illumination of some vast divine service, in the midst of which he lingered, unaffected, rich, shining with primeval indifference.* (*Op. cit.* 290.)

P. 88. *L'Ange du Méridien.*

In a letter to his wife on January 26th, 1906, Rilke thus described his first visit to Chartres: *Only the first impression, the way it rises up as in a great mantel, and then the first detail, a slim, weather-beaten angel holding a sundial in front of him, the whole diurnal procession of the hours opened, and above it one sees, still infinitely beautiful in its decay, the deep smile of his joyfully ministering face, like heaven reflecting itself.* (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 294.)

P. 97. *Last Evening.*

On November 6th, 1907, Rilke wrote to his wife from Breslau: *I drove out early to find the old churchyard where Nonna's young first husband rests. In the still cold, through which a little sun filtered, I found, among sympathetically old-fashioned surroundings, the overgrown ivy-grave, and read, before laying some ivory-yellow roses in the ivy, the simple tablet: Dodo Carl Georg Graf von Bethusy-Huc|Sec. Lieutenant in the Battalion of Defence Guards|born 6 Sept. 1835|volunteered 1 June 1866|fallen in the battle of Königgrätz 3 July 1866. That, with everything around, was like an additional stanza to "Last Evening," there already before the others.* (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914*, 18.)

'Frau Nonna' was Julie Freifrau von Nordeck zur Rabenau.

P. 99. *Tombs of the Hetææ, etc.*

Rilke sent copies of three of these five blank-verse poems, or, as he himself called them, 'poems in prose'—*Tombs of the Hetææ; Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes; Birth of Venus*—from Sweden on November 21st, 1904, to the Fischers for publication in *Die Neue Rundschau*: *These three 'Poems in Prose' are the best, ripest, amplest that I have, and belong to those few things of mine that satisfy my judgment.* (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1906*, 230.)

P. 101. *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.*

In this poem and in *Alcestis* some of Rilke's most characteristic thoughts and feelings about women and about the difference between women and men are expressed. Rilke, who was so essentially an artist that he tended to regard life primarily as material to be transmuted into art, and one of the chief sources of whose inspiration was a singular capacity for experiencing, in and through prolonged solitude and seclusion, 'otherness' and 'unknown modes of being',—Rilke seems, perhaps unconsciously, to have found in contemplating the lives and histories of certain, as one might be tempted to say, romantically situated women, whom he tended to regard as representative, something symbolic of the life he himself seemed destined to lead: a strange detachment, intactness, and intangibility; a capacity for love which so greatly transcended its immediate object that it seemed destined to find its satisfaction only in the infinite; an habitual communion with things remote from the concerns of obstreperous and practically-minded males; a capacity to discharge the ordinary duties and functions of life with efficiency and even with distinction, and yet, as it were, in a kind of dream, as though these things were, after all, but appearances, not realities, shadows, not substantial things, and as though what really mattered lay far behind and beyond. Rilke, indeed, tended to find in all solitary figures, in all figures whose solitude seemed somehow necessary and functional, in sensitive women surrounded by insensitive men, in the Saint, in Christ Himself, in the smile, growing ever more ineffably beautiful with the slow progress of decay, of some weathered stone figure in a garden or on a cathedral tower, symbols of the Poet, of the Poet whom he could scarcely help regarding as the ideal representative of humanity.

But to return to Rilke's characteristic thoughts about women, on September 7th, 1906, he wrote to Countess Mary Gneisenau, thinking of their friend Countess Luise Schwerin, who had died at the beginning of the year: *It is strange (and before all the portraits of women I saw here in the neighbouring castles I felt it again and again), how very imperishable are the histories of women: perhaps because, even while they are occurring, they already contain something unreachable, no-longer-visible, in deepest misery blessed; because everything that happens to women is already so detached, so yonderly*

distant: that, perhaps, is why it can appear as though death did not carry a woman any further off than she had always been, in her lonely experiencing and longing, from everything, already. (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1906-1907*, 68-9.) In *Malte Laurids Brigge* there are some further reflexions on this detachment and intangibility of women: *We know about her and her, because letters exist, which have been miraculously preserved, or books with reproachful or mournful poems, or pictures that look at us in a gallery through a mist of tears with which the painter has succeeded because he did not know what it was. But there have been innumerable more of them; some, who burnt their letters, and others, who had no more strength to write them. Grey-haired women, who had grown hard, with a kernel of deliciousness in them, which they concealed. Shapeless, corpulent women, who, having grown stout from exhaustion, allowed themselves to become similar to their husbands and yet who within were utterly different, there, where their love had laboured, in the dark. Bearers of children who never wanted to bear, and who, when they finally died in the eighth birth, had the gestures and the lightness of girls looking forward to love. And those who remained beside brawlers and toppers, because they had found the means of being in their own selves more distant from them than anywhere else; and when they came into company were unable to repress it, and shone as though they always consorted with the blest.* (*G.W.*, V. 161.)

P. 115. *Archaic Torso of Apollo.*

With the last lines compare the description in *Malte Laurids Brigge* of a certain actress (probably the Duse). She tried to distract the gaze of the audience from herself to the immense reality that filled her: *But they were already breaking into applause in their terror of the extreme: as though at the last moment to deflect from themselves something that would compel them to change their lives.* (*G.W.*, V, 273.)

P. 119. *The Egyptian Mary.*

Of St. Mary the Egyptian ('l'Egipcienne' of Villon's *Ballade fait à la Requete de sa Mère*), who is not to be confused with St. Mary Magdalene, I take the following brief account from Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, 4th edit., 1730, III, 334: *Marie l'Egyptienne, fameuse débauchée, et fameuse convertie. A l'âge de douze ans elle sortit de la maison de son père et s'en alla dans la ville d'Alexandrie. Elle y passa vingt-sept années dans les desordres de l'impureté et puis elle s'en*

*alla à Jerusalem pour continuer la même vie: mais une puissance invisible l'ayant empêchée d'entrer au Temple le jour de l'exaltation de la Sainte Croix, elle sentit des remords qui l'obligèrent à se prosterner devant une Image de la Ste. Vierge, et à promettre de renoncer à ses débauches. Elle entra ensuite dans le Temple, et après y avoir adoré le Croix, elle demanda à la Sainte Vierge ce qu' elle feroit pour plaire à Dieu. Elle entendit une voix qui lui ordonna de s'en aller dans le desert. Elle obéit, et fit pénitence dans ce lieu-là quarante-sept ans sans voir personne. Elle y fut servie par les Anges les trente dernières années.*

P. 120. *The Resurrection.*

Here is expressed one of Rilke's profoundest and most characteristic ideas, that of 'love without the beloved,' a kind of variation on Spinoza's saying that no one who truly loves God can wish God to love him in return. If I may quote from my own Commentary on *Later Poems* (1938, 243): *Here we have the very kernel of what might be called Rilke's philosophy of love. He felt that the immense reserve of emotional energy developed or released by that experience ought not to be squandered on a transient and comparatively trivial satisfaction, but suppressed, repressed, dammed up like a stream, until it reached an almost unbearable intensity, and then used as the propulsive force for some journey to the infinite, to undiscovered regions of thought and feeling. It might, perhaps, be objected that here art was encroaching upon life; that, while the exhortation to sublimate his emotional experiences, to divert and convert them into means of imaginative discovery and creation, may be valid for the artist, it is only partially valid for humanity in general. I feel there is something in this objection, but, at the same time, I also feel that (like many other objections to Rilke) it tends to flatter too much our satisfaction with ourselves as we are. We should try to restrain, at any rate for a little, that self-defensive rage which impels us to throttle the doubts Rilke's works often cast upon our most cherished convictions: it is, perhaps, good for us to feel before them, as he himself felt before the Archaic Torso of Apollo:*

*here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.*

P. 121. *From the Life of a Saint.*

Rilke was always much preoccupied with the lives of the saints. They, like certain women, especially like certain great

unsatisfied women lovers, came to possess for him a kind of symbolic and typical significance: in their loneliness, which was also that of the artist (as Rilke understood him), and in their readiness to submit themselves to the influence of powers which immeasurably transcended them. For Rilke, with his capacity and desire to experience 'otherness' and 'unknown modes of being,' with his destiny (as he himself once conceived and expressed it) 'to pass by the human, to reach the uttermost, the edge of the earth' (see Introduction, p. 52), what made the saint symbolic and representative was the fact that his desires did not (in Platonic language) terminate upon particular and finite objects. *In considering humanity*, he wrote to a correspondent in 1913, *I cannot do otherwise than think straight on to the saint (in whom at last everything becomes comprehensible and necessary to me)* (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914*, 273); and on April 14th, 1910, he wrote to Marietta Frein von Nordeck zur Rabenau, who had told him of certain unfulfilled wishes: *I am often inclined to ask myself whether the fulfilment really has anything to do with the wishes. True, so long as the wish is weak it is like a half and requires fulfilment, like a second half, in order to become something independent. But wishes can so wonderfully expand into something whole, full, entire, which will not allow itself to be further supplemented, which only goes on increasing from within itself and forms and fills itself. One could sometimes suppose that just this had been the cause of the greatness and intensity of a life,—the fact that it indulged in wishes that were too great and which, like a spring, impelled from within its activity upon activity, influence upon influence, out into life: wishes that no longer knew what they had been originally bent upon and which now in a quite elemental way, like a strong, falling water, turned into action and kindness, into immediate existence, into joyful courage, according as occurrence and occasion inter-connected them. I know I am taking your little intimation far too importantly and seriously in loading it with so many words—it quite vanishes under them; but this, as intuition, had somehow already grown ready to drop in me (perhaps through the reading of saints' lives, with which I am much occupied, again and again), and I could not resist that little impulsion to express what was somehow ready.* (*Op. cit.*, 98-9).

In *Malte Laurids Brigge*, after a description of pictures representing the temptation of St. Anthony and other saints, Rilke has an interesting and revealing passage on the significance of these things even to-day: *There was a time when I regarded these*

*pictures as antiquated. Not that I doubted their reality. I could imagine that such things might have happened to the saints, at that time, to those zealous and over-hasty souls who wanted to begin straight away with God, at any price. We no longer make such demands upon ourselves. We suspect that He is too difficult for us, that we must postpone Him in order slowly to perform the long labour that separates us from Him. Now, though, I know that this labour is just as combative as sainthood: that such things rise up around all those who are solitary for that labour's sake as took shape around those solitaires of God in their caves and empty shelters, long ago. (G.W., V, 218.)*

In his Deneke Lecture (1946) on *Pétrarque et sa Muse* Professor Étienne Gilson draws attention to the fact that in the lives of certain supreme artists art has only finally triumphed at the cost of suppressing a potential saint: *Le fond même de l'artiste, c'est qu'un impérieux besoin le domine de créer des œuvres d'art. A cela il est prêt à tout sacrifier sans réserve, lui-même et ceux qui l'entourent. Une sorte d'égoïsme transcendant le domine, non pas celui de son propre ego, mais celui de l'œuvre à naître qu'il porte confusément en lui. C'est pourquoi l'artiste digne de ce nom est si près de la religion, dont il emploie souvent le langage, parce que, comme l'âme religieuse, la sienne se sent en présence d'un absolu, que sa transcendance autorise à exiger de ses serviteurs une soumission totale. Il faut prendre au pied de la lettre les passages du *Canzoniere* où Pétrarque dit que son amour pour Laure le conduit vers Dieu, et non moins littéralement ceux où il nous dit, dans le *Secretum*, que son amour pour Laure l'en détourne, car le spectacle de la beauté sensible peut déchaîner dans l'âme de certains hommes une violente émotion créatrice à partir de laquelle la création du saint et celle de l'œuvre d'art sont également probables. Saint François d'Assise a choisi la première, mais qui ne sent, en lisant Dante et Pétrarque, que la nostalgie de la sainteté sacrifiée à l'art n'a jamais cessé de les hanter, d'autant plus profondément même que leur triomphe sur l'art enfin conquis les laissait désarmés devant le regret de la sainteté perdue ? (32-3.)*

P. 124. *The Stranger.*

On October 21st, 1913, Rilke wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé from Paris: *Will you believe me, when I tell you that the sight of a woman who passed me in a quiet street in Rouen so disturbed me, that thereafter I could see almost nothing, concentrate on nothing? . . .*

*Reading something, resting, looking out—yes, I could be contented*

*with everything, if only it were entirely mine again, and did not keep discharging itself into longing. I'm alarmed when I think of the way I've been living out of myself, as though always standing at a telescope, ascribing to every woman who approached a bliss that could certainly never have been discovered in one of them: my bliss, the bliss—once—of my loneliest hours. How often I have to recall that poem in New Poems entitled, I think, "The Stranger,"—how well I knew what was needed:*

*"And to let all this, without all craving,  
slip behind him."*

*And I, who still do nothing but crave.—Begin over again. (Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914, 301-2.)*

## REQUIEM

Rilke sent a copy of the first Requiem (*For a Friend*) to his publisher, Anton Kippenberg, from Paris on November 4th, 1908, saying it had come to him quite unexpectedly during the last few days, and that he would like it to be published separately, as a book, however small. Two days later—November 6th—he sent a copy of the second Requiem (*For Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth*): *It will also have an interest for you in so far as it forms a requiem for Count Wolf von Kalckreuth, whose destiny and departure profoundly affected me. The two poems supplement and strengthen one another, and my idea that they ought perhaps to form a publication on their own is now, as you will understand, more decided than ever.*

*It is a long time since my work so surprised me as through this wave, which advanced so calmly and overtook what I had under my hands. (Briefe an seinen Verleger, 45-6.)*

The two poems were, according to Rilke's wish, issued together as a separate publication in 1909. The third Requiem, *For a Boy*, written in November, 1915, and completely different both in tone and style, was nevertheless placed beside the other two in the second volume of the first edition of Rilke's collected works, where it was first published.



P. 129. *For a Friend.*

The friend was Paula Becker, 'the blonde painter,' as Rilke calls her in his journals, a painter of genius and the intimate friend of Rilke's wife, Clara Westhoff. He met them both for the first time when he was staying in the artists' colony of Worpswede in 1900. Shortly after Rilke's marriage to Clara Westhoff in April, 1901, Paula Becker married the good-natured but rather mediocre artist Otto Modersohn, another member of the colony. The marriage was not successful, and in February, 1906, Paula, who felt that it was strangling her creative powers, left her husband and came to Paris, where she saw a good deal of Rilke, who seems only gradually to have recognized the full extent of her genius. Her husband, who had written many letters begging her to return to him, finally came to Paris himself in September, and two months later Paula reluctantly returned with him to Germany. She died, exclaiming 'What a shame!' on November 21st, 1907, shortly after giving birth to a child.

*Rilke said of Paula Modersohn-Becker that she had made the magnificent attempt to reach a unity, and added, with a look of sadness in his eyes, 'She is the only dead friend who troubles me'. He regarded this death as the ultimate answer to an ultimate question, gruesomely bitter, because this woman, who longed for a two-fold creativeness, was fitted as was no other for the artistic, and, since she insisted on achieving the feminine as well, was punished with death, as though by a wrathfully refusing god, at a time when she was not yet ready for death. Something troubled and unresolved remains in the Requiem dedicated to her memory, and remained in the poet's attitude to that event. (Katharina Kippenberg, Rainer Maria Rilke: Ein Beitrag, 2nd edit., 1938, 46.)* If this was what Rilke really said to Katharina Kippenberg, at some time after their first meeting in 1910, it would seem to represent a considerable departure both from the facts, so far as we know them, and from the tone and attitude of the *Requiem For a Friend*. For Paula was so far from *longing* for a two-fold creativeness that she left her husband in order to devote herself to her art, and only reluctantly returned to him. It was, however, difficult for Rilke, who once declared that there was no such thing as injustice in the whole world, to persist in an attitude of rebelliousness and accusation, and he shared to some extent the characteristically German tendency to regard whatever

happened as inevitable, as destiny (*Schicksal*). Moreover, he probably came to regard Paula's fate as a peculiarly poignant example of that opposition between the claims of art and those of ordinary life of which he himself was so acutely aware, and which, indeed, finds some expression in the Requiem. Professor E. M. Butler, in her book on Rilke, professes to find something else there too: trying, a little perversely, I cannot but think, to connect the Requiem with certain rather morbid and sentimental passages in the journal which Rilke kept during his stay at Worpswede between the end of August and beginning of October, 1900, she suggests that his bitterness is directed not so much against Man and ordinary life (personified in Otto Modersohn) for having destroyed an artist, or against Paula herself for having sacrificed the artist in her to the woman, as against Paula, of whose genius, during his stay at Worpswede, Rilke seems to have been little aware, and whom he seems then to have regarded, first and foremost, as the very type and essence of intact and intangible girlhood, for not having fulfilled what then seemed to him her destiny, for not having, as it were, simply bloomed and faded like a rose, and against Modersohn for having interfered with this imaginary destiny by marrying her. Whatever the precise truth may be, there certainly remains, as Katharina Kippenberg says, something troubled and unresolved in the poem. For my own part, I must admit that Paula's fate irresistibly reminds me of Virginia Woolf's imaginary biography (in *A Room of One's Own*) of Shakespeare's sister.

P. 131. l. 10. *And finally you saw yourself as fruit, etc.*

*The Requiem for Paula shows that Rilke was well acquainted with her last pictures: self-portraits in the nude. He referred to these implicitly in the poem, mentioning the amber necklace which figured in the paintings. (E. M. Butler, Rainer Maria Rilke, 112.)*

P. 135. ll. 9-11.

*takes her way  
along some narrow strip of her existence,  
as through a miracle, without mischance.*

*These lines contain a skilful allusion to an incident in her married life which Modersohn had told Rilke himself. Paula had once insisted on walking along a half-submerged pier in a violent storm, and he had been unable to restrain her. Balefully ingenious, Rilke now turned this tale against him. (E. M. Butler, Op. cit., 114.)*

P. 137. *For Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth.*

The subject of this Requiem, translator of Verlaine and Baudelaire and the author of original poems, shot himself, at the beginning of his period of military service, on October 9th, 1906. That afternoon he had told his companions that he hoped by the evening to be walking with Socrates and Plato.

P. 137. l.30. *Your little saviour's burden to the shore.*  
An allusion to the legend of St. Christopher.

P. 142. *For a Boy.*

This Requiem, written in November, 1915, is the latest poem included in this volume, and has many affinities with Rilke's later work, e.g. with the fourth of the *Duino Elegies*, also written in 1915.

P. 143. l.6. *My toy, too, sometimes kept me company, etc.*  
Cf. the Fourth Elegy, ll 72-3:

there we would stand  
within the gap left between world and toy

and the remarkable essay *Dolls*, written in 1914 and occasioned by the famous wax dolls of Lotte Pritzel: e.g., *At a time when all were concerned to give us swift and reassuring answers, it was she, this doll, who first inflicted on us that silence larger than life which later breathed upon us again and again out of space whenever we approached the boundaries of our existence. In face of her, as she stared at us, we first experienced (or do I deceive myself?) that hollowness of feeling, that cessation of the heart, in which one would vanish did not the whole of softly proceeding Nature transport one, like something inanimate, over abysses. (G.W., IV, 271.) But this being-less-than-a-thing, in all*

## NOTES

*its irremediability, contains the secret of her superiority. The child must accustom itself to things, it must accept them, each thing has its pride. Things endure the doll, none of them love her; one might suppose that the table flung her down, one has scarcely turned one's eyes when she is once more lying on the floor. Beginners in the world as we were, we could feel superior to nothing save, at the best, to such a half-object as this, which had been placed beside us as a potsherd is placed beside the creatures in aquariums, so that they may find in it a measure and distinguishing mark of their environment. We orientated ourselves by the doll. (Op. cit., 272-3.)*

See also the passage from Rilke's lecture on Rodin (1907), quoted in my Commentary on the Fourth Elegy, pp. 120-1.

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